

SIMON

This is a story about the nature of love, rather than a 'love story'. It is about Simon as Anna saw him. They knew each other first through an exchange of letters in the dark days of the war. Simon was at sea, and his descriptions of a life so different from her own enthralled Anna ~~who~~, like Desdemona, began to 'love him for the dangers he had passed'.

Time went by, and they met. But in the long months of letter writing, Anna had fallen in love with a dream. The real Simon puzzled and disturbed her. In part he was as she believed him to be, but he was also complex and tormented, a man reaching out for tenderness yet afraid of it.

'Love is stronger than justice' is the theme of this story, simply and gently told, in which a woman finds tranquillity through a decision that to many people would seem folly.

By the same author



THE YEAR RETURNS
A RIVER FULL OF STARS

SIMON

by

Elizabeth Hamilton



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**If I had wings like Noah's dove
I'd fly up the river
To the one I love.
Fare thee well, O Honey,
Fare thee well!**

A NEGRO FOLK SONG

TO ROMUALD

I

THIS story is about Simon. Simon as I knew him. It began on an evening in December. I was sitting in the lamplight, with the letter in front of me on the table.

It was very kind of you to finish knitting the socks that Mrs Fielden had begun for me, and I am sorry to have been so long in writing to thank you. I received them only a couple of days ago on my return to London after a long spell in the Mediterranean, during the latter part of which no mail was forwarded to us from England—some difficulty, it seems, in shipping it to Malta. At first we were carrying oil from Haifa for the French fleet at Toulon and Marseilles; and then, after France fell, for our own ships at Gibraltar.

Shortly before I reached London, blast from a land-mine wrecked the house at the corner of Upper Montague Street where I have stayed for some years past when ashore. However, I found a room close by in the square and have been fortunate, too, in recovering some of my belongings from the debris—among other things, the parcel containing the socks and your letter, and also, I am

glad to say, a few books and pictures, and a wooden madonna that I picked up in a Spanish port some years ago.

I hope that, perhaps, you will find time to write to me again. I am expecting before long—because of my experience in oil tankers—to be appointed to a command in the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. This, I imagine, will mean the north of Scotland—Scapa Flow, and then further afield on convoys.

You might like, sometime, to see a few embroidered handkerchiefs that I bought at Nazareth, at a convent belonging to French nuns and said to be built on the site of the house in which the Holy Family lived. I made an expedition there by car from Haifa with another officer . . .

In the postscript I read: 'Thank you again, very much, for the socks. I shall take especial care of them, and be sure to wash them myself!'

I liked the directness of the letter, and the clear, rather precise handwriting with a margin left on either side of the page. I could visualize the writer, neat and smart in his officer's uniform. . . . My imagination had always been ready to run away with me—like Dai, the old grey pony that I rode on the farm as a child. He would be trotting along steady as could be, when, suddenly, down went his head, the bit between his teeth, and away he would go. . . . The mention of Toulon and Marseilles, Haifa and Nazareth, awoke in me a sense of excitement, adventure.

The horizon of my world seemed to have widened. The thought of the sea and shipping in any form had always moved me; whether it was the fishing boats in the little harbours of Pembroke . . . Solva . . . St Brides . . . Broad Haven . . . or the larger vessels at Fishguard.

'I'll marry a sailor,' I said to my father, when I was four years old, as I stood with my hand in his watching the boat sail for Rosslare.

'That's a fine idea!' he had answered. My father had always taken my ideas seriously; always said that they were *fine*. . . .

My parcel had been recovered from the debris of a bombed house. It was almost as though it were meant to happen. It could easily have been otherwise. I thought, too, of one evening in April when I had gone upstairs after supper to make a cup of tea for Mrs Fielden. Yes, it must have been April, or perhaps early in May; for I had stopped on the landing to look out at the little star-like anemones flowering in the hazel copse at the back of the house. The old lady—I recalled this clearly—was sitting up in bed wearing a linen jacket trimmed with crochet, like a tray cloth, and threaded with blue ribbons. Mrs Fielden's jackets were unique. They always looked as though they had been freshly laundered, one for each day. While we talked, she had flung her knitting across the bed saying, 'Anna, my dear, you finish these socks for me and send them to Simon with a letter. It will do him good to hear from someone young.'

It was not the first time that Mrs Fielden had mentioned Simon. He came from Somerset, she had told me, but she met him through friends at Liverpool, when he was a cadet on board the *Conway*. Later, she used to invite him to her flat in London. When the war came, and the bombing, she had been persuaded to move to the west country. Before going on to a cousin at Sidmouth, she had taken a room for some months at Wells, in the guest house where I was then staying. . . .



I picked up my pen. Soon I had covered a couple of pages in answer to Simon's letter. Then I tore them up and began afresh. My writing looked wild and spidery as compared with the neatness of his hand. I was unsure, too, whether what I was saying would be of interest. But there it was. I could only do my best.

I told him little inconsequent things: how fine the Lombardy poplars looked from my window—standing there by the cathedral, all stripped of their leaves and slender against the sky; and how, in a nearby garden, the Glastonbury thorn was opening its buds, though Christmas had not yet come. I told him that I fire-watched once a week, at the school; and that I was learning the names of stars unknown to me before. Algol. Aldebaran. Betelgeuse. He, of course, being a seafarer, would know all about the stars. I said that I would like to see the handkerchiefs from

Nazareth. And could I hear more about his voyages, please?

I am very sorry [I ended] that you came back to a devastated house and the loss of your belongings. I have not a home either. My father died a year ago, and I teach in a school evacuated here from London, and have a room in this guest house. My aunt Kate, my father's sister, is also here, until repairs can be done to a cottage she has bought. She has been a mother to me as far back as I can remember.

As I turned away after dropping the letter into the box in the market square, I nearly collided with a tall, well-built man in the late sixties, dressed in the dark blue uniform worn by members of the Civil Defence.

'Hello, Anna,' he said. 'Posting a letter?' The furrowed, horse-like face was handsome, and its expression gentle.

'Yes,' I answered. And then I said, 'It's to a friend at sea.' I found the words satisfying—the more so because Doctor Laine had himself served for some time on board ship, as a Surgeon Commander in the Royal Navy.

'I'm glad,' he said, his face crinkling into a smile. 'And I hope all is well with him?'

He walked at my side under the archway and then along the moat. A pair of swans, their necks coiled back and their bills tucked into their feathers, were

floating, pale as lotus flowers, on the ink-black water. Beyond, rose the battlements of the Bishop's Palace, washed by the moon to an unearthly whiteness, and plastered, like a Chinese screen, with the skeleton shapes of fruit trees.

I was glad of the doctor's company. There was a bond of sympathy between us. It was something intangible. I was conscious of it the first day that we sat side by side at the dining-room table in Chantry House. He used to come for lunch on Sundays: for he was a widower, and Mrs Mulholland, his housekeeper, liked to visit her daughter on that day. Besides, it helped to eke out the rations.

Sometimes he arrived a little late. Until he came, the room was quiet. The old ladies seemed to be listening. Then the gate clicked, there were steps in the hall, and the door opened. There was something courtly about his entrance: he used to bow, and his smile, while taking in the whole room, yet seemed to be meant for each one alone.

He sat on my left at a table in the middle of the room which my aunt and myself shared with Mrs Theobald, the stout widow of an archdeacon, and a Miss McBurney who had faded mist-blue eyes and a voice that tripped up the scale like the notes of a wood-warbler. Now that he had come, the tension relaxed, and the chatter began. It was as if the old ladies were vying with one another to tell him the latest gossip or to offer him the loan of their papers. Only Aunt Kate kept aloof. She thought this 'male

adulation', as she called it, quite absurd. 'Can't they let the man drink his soup?' she would murmur to me in a voice intended to be an undertone but audible to the room at large.

I liked to talk to him; but, when I did so, I would see Mrs Devine—who sat in a corner by herself—staring at me disapprovingly from under the brim of her purple velour hat. The other old ladies were kindly and amusing. But for Mrs Devine, I experienced an emotion which came very close to fear. Yet, from time to time, under cover of the general conversation, the doctor would turn to me to ask, perhaps, if I would like to borrow a book from his library. He collected detective stories, and his works on natural history ranged from Aristotle and Pliny to Grey of Fallodon.

Now and again, I joined him on one of his 'expeditions'. Together we clambered up the slopes at the back of the town, scouring the woods for tiny scarlet toadstools or clusters of coral spindleberries.

Sometimes we met on a Sunday morning—I on my way from Mass, the doctor from early service at the cathedral.

'I'm a heretic in your eyes!' he would say in banter.

And I would laugh: 'No, no. You belong to the soul of the church!' . . .

As we parted at the gate of Chantry House, I saw a chink of light in a first-floor window. It widened very slowly, to an inch or two, then narrowed again. Mrs

Devine, I said to myself. No one could go in or out, day or night, but that she had to peer through the curtains. There were times when it maddened me. Tonight I only smiled.

II

A^{*DAY} or so before Christmas a square box came by post. When I opened it, I found a mass of violets. They were dark purple, and moist as though they had been gathered under the dew. I put them in my Christening mug. They looked very lovely—the rich, dark blossoms and the glittering silver standing on the window sill through the snow-laden days of Christmas.

Then two cards came; each in a separate envelope.

One showed a wind-wrecked thorn-tree against a background of snow and leaden sky. It was a desolate scene. I could hear the wind shrilling through the twisted branches. There was a slip of paper inside with the words: 'You told me you liked leafless trees.'

The second card was decorated with a picture of a girl, dressed in gaily coloured skiing clothes, leaping down a mountain-side.

Years later I used to think back to these cards—each different from the other, yet each reflecting an aspect of Simon's character.

More letters came after Christmas.

In one he wrote of how he was spending his leave in London. He had gone to Mass at Farm Street

Church on Christmas morning, then dined at his club. In the afternoon he went back to his room to write letters. Mrs Oddie, his landlady, was a widow. She came from Surbiton, she told him. For some years, however, she had been housekeeper to a 'legal gentleman', who, at his death before the outbreak of war, had left her the house in Montague Square. She kept two dogs. One was a griffon, the other a woolly, middle-aged animal called Adrastus. 'Rastus was fed on Oxo cubes dissolved in powdered milk; and, because he suffered from draughts, he was put to bed at night wearing a vest knitted by his mistress.

In another letter he enclosed the handkerchiefs from Nazareth.

In another there was a view of Istanbul by night. It was perforated with tiny holes, so that when I held it against the lamp, I saw domes and cupolas and minarets all picked out with lights. This little picture awoke in me a memory of early childhood . . . My father, with his pale face and dark imaginative eyes, was sitting at my bedside, pricking holes with a pin through a picture postcard from Paris. Then, holding it against the candlelight, he said, 'Now, my little one, you will see the world and all the glory thereof!' And very wonderful it seemed to a child who had known only a farm in Pembrokeshire! My father was English, with a streak of Irish on his mother's side. Writing was his profession, but after his marriage he took to farming—choosing Pembroke as being a place dear both to himself and his wife; for my mother

was of Welsh stock and they had met at St. Davids.

I, too, wrote letters during Christmas and the days that followed. I used to write in my bedroom, with a rug wrapped around my knees. I could have sat downstairs by the fire. But this was my secret life: something delicate and tenuous. A harsh breath might destroy it.



On the last day of December a large envelope came with two photographs inside.

One was small and faded. It showed the head and shoulders of a boy of about sixteen in the uniform of a naval cadet. The mouth was firm; perhaps a little obstinate. The eyes were large and deep-set, and serious for one of his years. It was as though he were pondering some problem.

The second photograph was larger. It was of a man somewhere in his late thirties, wearing officer's uniform. Again there were the deep-set eyes and the serious expression; but lines ran from the nostrils to the corners of the mouth. I looked at the face carefully. It pleased me. Yet it puzzled me too. I laid my hand over the mouth, so that I could examine the eyes in greater detail. Then I covered the eyes, to look at the mouth. One side had a stubborn droop; the other was gentle, perhaps quizzical. In a note enclosed I read:

The small photograph belonged to my mother. I

don't know what you will make of the more recent one. Please keep it if you like, but I'm afraid I look a bit glum.

I posted back the smaller of the two. 'I like both pictures very much.' I wrote: 'You look exactly as a sailor ought.'

★ ★ ★

On the morning of the Epiphany, I was opening the hall door to go out to Mass, when a shoal of letters came through the box. Yes, there was Simon's writing. I picked up the envelope and tore it open. My eyes fell on the words:

I had a priority telegram this morning, and am busy collecting my gear. Shall be travelling north—Euston to Thurso—at the end of the week, to join a ship.

I put the letter into my pocket. 'Travelling north to join a ship.' I said the words over to myself as I walked through the silent, frosty streets, under a sky still lit with stars. I felt a wave of sadness: a sense of emptiness at the thought that he was going away, to join a ship, without our having met. There seemed to be a finality about it, as though I had come to the end of a story.

I was still thinking over his words as I sat in the darkness of the church, watching the altar boy light the candles. He was a little fellow with tousled red hair and a cassock that was too long for him. Each time he passed in front of the Tabernacle he genu-

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flected awkwardly, as if he were going to tumble over. I took out the letter and, straining my eyes, I read snatches of it while I waited for Mass to begin.

The enemy planes are busy over London—I hope it is quiet with you . . . Tell me, please, can I do any shopping for you before I sail? It would be a great pleasure. . . . I am sorry to be going now. I was planning to come down to the west country to meet you. Please send me a photograph of yourself before I leave—a small one.

A small photograph? Was it, maybe, to go in his pocket-book? To be with him on his voyages? It was not, then, the end of the story: only the end of a chapter. He was not going out of my life. He was taking me with him, to his ship and over the wild, mine-infested sea.

'Introibo ad altare Dei.'

The murmur of the Mass came to me.

'Ad Deum qui laetificat iuventutem meam.'

The God who gives gladness to my youth.

* * *

When I was leaving the church, I stopped for a moment to look at the crib. Mary and the Child and Joseph were there as on Christmas morning, but the shepherds had given place to the kings. They were kneeling in the straw, with their gifts held out in front of them. Gold, frankincense and myrrh. The last of

the king was dark-skinned. As I looked at him, I felt a sudden tenderness. Perhaps it was because he was different from the others. It was the feeling that came over me as a child, when I heard the Prince of Morocco say to Portia :

‘Mislike me not for my complexion.’ . . .

I felt with my hand for the letter in my pocket.

‘May the Epiphany star shine upon him and upon me,’ I prayed, ‘and may the Queen of Heaven be with him in his voyagings.’



Mr Quigley, the photographer, lived in the market square, in a lopsided timbered house. He was an elderly, nervous-looking man.

‘What is it?’ he said, his eyes peering at me over his spectacles.

‘I want a small photograph, rather quickly, please,’ I told him.

‘Quickly indeed!’ he muttered querulously. ‘Things take time in these days.’

‘Yes, of course. I understand,’ I replied, hoping to placate him. Then I added, ‘It’s for someone going to join his ship.’

‘We’ll do what we can. We’ll do what we can,’ he grumbled. His expression had softened.

I followed him through the shop which was crowded with views of the cathedral, and the kind of knickknacks that tourists used to buy in the years before the war,

then up a flight of uneven stairs into a darkened room.

'Smile!' he said fiercely, darting his head from under a black cloth.



I looked at the photograph, doubtfully. The hair was plaited close about the head, the face was heart-shaped, the brows arched. 'You look as surprised as a pigeon,' Aunt Kate once exclaimed when I was a child; and my father used to say that my face was 'all a question mark'. What would Simon think, I asked myself.

I sent it to him with a letter in which I wrote:

I am sorry you are going away. I hope we will meet another time you are ashore. It is very kind of you to offer to shop for me. The only thing I need is a piqué collar to go on a dress I am making.

The next few days passed slowly. I was uneasy about the photograph. I had misgivings, too, about the collar. Perhaps I ought not to have bothered him with shopping of so feminine a nature.

Then a brown envelope came. There was a letter inside, and something else wrapped in tissue paper.

The letter ran: 'I like the photograph, very much. Yes we must meet when I next have leave. Meanwhile, I hope the shopping will please you.'

I opened the tissue paper. The collar was made of pink piqué and pointed like a star.

III

SIMON came to Wells in September.

I had received a letter the same morning :

I have to make an unexpected call tomorrow afternoon at the Admiralty in Bath—concerned with a change of ship. I shall come on afterwards to Wells, for the night, in the hope of seeing you. Please do not put yourself out in any way. I may be late arriving. If so, I will call at Chantry House the following morning.

You will be sorry to hear, if you have not already done so, that my old friend Mrs Fielden died about a fortnight ago. The cousin with whom she was staying at Sidmouth came across some of my letters and was kind enough to let me know. I had the news on reaching Montague Square last night. . . .

Mrs Fielden in her immaculate linen jackets . . . flinging her knitting across the bed . . . 'Finish these socks' . . . Death is a shock always. Besides, I had looked forward to meeting her again. We could have talked about Simon. Mrs Fielden could have told me many things; answered many questions; perhaps given wise advice. Yes, I was sorry. And Simon would be sorry, too, and perhaps lonely. One friend less to

write to him, to want to see him when he was ashore. . . . But this very evening he was coming. The thought filled my mind, leaving no room for mourning.



I waited in the black-out as the last bus from Bath swung into the market square. I had walked across the green several times already to meet the buses. He was certain to come by this one. Then I began to wonder, as passenger after passenger got out. He was the last of all! I knew him without a shadow of doubt. It was characteristic of him to appear at the last minute, just when it might seem that he had not come.

He stood, for a moment, looking about him. Then he put down the case he was carrying, and, striking a match, cupped his hands to light his pipe.

I watched him at a little distance. In the long months of our letter writing—and in the silences that, in the circumstances of war, inevitably stretched at times between the coming of his letters—I had built up in my imagination a picture of someone self-assured, ready to take the initiative, knowing always what to do. But now, as I looked at his face in the glow of the match light, I experienced an unaccountable sense of compassion—a desire to comfort him. It was not because of Mrs Fielden's death, though that flashed through my mind. It was something about the man himself. I was moved as when, on Epiphany

morning, I had looked upon the dark complexion of the King Balthazar. He seemed in some way lonely, helpless. And yet it was the face that I had become familiar with in the photograph, only a little older, a little more sensitive, perhaps.

I went up to him and said, formally: 'How do you do? I've taken a room for you, in the Swan.' He started, slightly, at the sound of my voice.

'That was very thoughtful,' he said, putting out his hand. 'I didn't mean you to be bothered. I imagined I would find somewhere.' Then he repeated, 'It was very thoughtful.' He spoke as though he were not used to having things done for him.

We walked side by side under the echoing Penniless Porch, then turned left across the green. It would have been quicker to have gone to the hotel by the street. But, hardly conscious of what I did, I had chosen this way. The cathedral loomed above us, black against the stars.

'Yes; it has a timeless quality, the cathedral,' he said, more as though he were talking to himself than to me. He was echoing something that I had written in a letter. It pleased me that he should have remembered it; and I liked the quiet, even tenor of his voice. From time to time I stole a glance at him. His face looked pale in the darkness. I was reminded of an engraving that I had once seen of Lord Nelson, his face pale against a stormy sky. . . . Certainly the reality in no way fell short of the image that had formed itself in my mind.

'I was sorry to hear about Mrs Fielden,' I said. 'You'll miss her very much, I know.' I spoke the words as though I were rehearsing a part.

'Yes,' he said, 'I shall. She has been a good friend to me.'

I wanted to say 'I, too, will be a good friend to you.' But it might seem presumptuous, so I just said, 'Yes, I'm sure she has.'

* * *

I waited in the hall of the hotel while he took his things to his room. As he came downstairs, I saw the row of medals on his breast and the three lines of braid on his sleeve. His eyes were blue: a clear blue, like glass. His smoothly brushed hair was the brown of heather honey. In that moment he was as wonderful in my sight as was Odysseus to the girl, Nausicaa, when Athene, daughter of Zeus, had clothed him in beauty. And the prayer of the Phaeacian princess echoed in my heart:

Would that the gods might give me such a one to be my husband.

I sat with him in the dimly lit lounge, while he ate sandwiches and drank a tankard of ale. He admired some sweet-peas in a vase. 'The first I've seen this year,' he said. And he made a laughing comment about a picture on the wall showing a sailing ship in distress. In repose his face had an almost doleful expression. Then a smile would sweep across it, like a

lighthouse beam upon the sea. His hair at the temples was touched with grey: it gave him a look of distinction, I thought.



He walked back with me to Chantry House. It was late, but I asked him in. I knew that Aunt Kate would have waited up, hoping to see him. As we went into the lounge, I noticed that he flushed up the back of his neck. I felt a certain constraint myself, as though I were being drawn back into my childhood. . . . A little girl bringing home a school-friend to be approved. And yet I was conscious of my aunt only vaguely, and then it was in relation to Simon. I wondered what he thought of her, as she sat there opposite him on the snuff-coloured settee: the round, good-natured face; the grey cropped hair, stiff as a badger's coat; the large capable hands resting on the nobbly tweed skirt, the square-toed shoes fastened with a button and strap. My aunt had always worn shoes of that kind indoors. Going about the farm she had a pair of men's boots laced half way up.

As we talked, I felt, again, the compassion that had come to me when I stood in the market square. He must be exhausted, I thought. He had travelled from London to Bath, from Bath to Wells.

'Aren't you tired?' I asked him.

'I am rather.' He stood up. 'I must be getting back to the hotel,' he said.

I went out with him on to the step. The darkness

was sweet with the scent of the last tobacco flowers. Each of us seemed to be waiting for the other to speak. Then he said, 'I'll call in the morning, if I may . . . We might look at the cathedral together . . . I knew it as a boy.'

'Yes, please. And you must come here to lunch.'

'No, no. You lunch with me at the Swan.'

When I came in, my aunt said, 'I like your beau, Anna. But I must say you gave him short shrift, sending him off to his bed like that!' And she laughed her big, generous laugh.

'I didn't send him to bed,' I answered hotly. 'He was tired.'

It was like Aunt Kate to come blundering in upon my dreams. She had a way of saying what was in her mind without reflection. It had led to a rumpus, sometimes, between herself and my father.

As I went upstairs, her words jabbed at me, setting up an uneasy trail of thoughts. Supposing what I said had sounded like a hint to go?

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I woke in the night. A breeze coming through the window played upon my cheeks. Above the black, feathery shapes of the poplars, Cygnus was spread-winged against the sky. I heard the 'Twit, twit' of an owl in the Palace garden and the steady roar of the waterfall. The cathedral clock struck two. I hoped that Simon was sleeping soundly.

IV

TEN o'clock. And a glorious, shining day.

I heard the gate click, and, looking out of the window, I saw Simon on the path below. I thought him no less splendid than the night before, and I hoped that, presently, when we went out together, Mrs Devine would be peering through the curtains.

I was wearing a blue silk dress. It was gentian blue, patterned with little egg-shaped flowers that might have been crocuses or, perhaps, tulips before the petals are fully open. They were woven into the silk in a lighter thread. On the back there were similar flowers, only dark on a light ground. Simon remarked on the design. Then, taking the edge of the sleeve which fell to my elbow, he turned it over so that he saw the pattern in reverse. 'This is charming,' he said. When I told him that I had made the dress he seemed yet more impressed.

'You must be clever with your needle,' he said. 'And I like the hat, too.' It was a white panama with a wide brim that came rather low, framing my face, and throwing up the blue darkness of my eyes

We walked past the octagonal chapter house, then under the Chain gate and down a flight of steps on to the green. A pair of pied wagtails were running in

little spurts on the grass, moving their legs like clock-work and, every now and then, darting sideways to snap at an insect. Simon noticed them; while I, in turn, drew his attention to a jackdaws' nest built in a niche on the west front, behind the statue of a king.

Inside the cathedral, the sun poured through the glass in shafts of emerald and crimson and gold that broke against the pillars, then fell upon the aisles in trembling pools of light. We stood side by side, staring gravely at carvings and brasses and tombs, our voices hushed, our footsteps echoing on the flagstones. We were alone, except for an elderly, black-gowned verger. The stillness all about us accentuated a faint fluttering tumult in my heart.

We went out by the south door, then along the cloisters, stopping, now and again, to decipher an inscription, or to look between the pillars at the little burial ground with the yew trees and the lichen-coated gravestones rising out of the unmown grass. At one moment, as I stood a few paces from him so that I saw his face moulded, as it were, against a shadowy background of an alcove—I was struck by the resemblance, in feature and expression, to an uncle of his, a clergyman, whose photograph he had enclosed in a letter. He had looked a fine man: dignified, a little stern, with an ironic twist to the mouth. I thought: 'Simon, I see you when you have grown old.'

We went down some steps, passed on our left the drawbridge that leads into the grounds of the Bishop's

palace, then walked along the moat and through a wishing gate into some fields. Cattle were grazing, and the grass was wet with dew. I noticed the drops of moisture on Simon's well polished shoes, and how, in accordance with naval regulations, they had no toe-caps. Ahead of us, we saw Dulcote Hill, sprawling and jagged against the sky.

We sat for a while on a wooden seat with our backs resting against a fence. The sun was hot, as though it were June. Wherever we looked there were hills. Dulcote Hill. Glastonbury Tor. The treeless heights of the Mendips. Little odd-shaped, hummocky hills jutting inconsequently from low-lying fields. Simon had fancy names for some of these—taught him, he said, by his grandfather. Pie-Dish hill. The Witch's Cap. King Arthur's Castle.

* * *

'Yes, I remember this countryside well,' he was saying. 'From my grandfather's house at Blue Anchor we saw the ships going up and down the channel and, in the distance, the mountains of Wales. My grandfather was a great character. He could tame any horse in the county, and he taught me to do the same.'

'Tell me,' I asked, 'did you always want to be a sailor?'

'Yes, I think so. But it was not easy. My father died at sea when I was six—he was a commander in the Royal Navy. The uncle who became my guardian was set against it. Said it wasn't fair on my mother.'

Besides, he had no son, and wanted me to succeed to his property—he owned several farms. . . . Finally, I made my own arrangements to go to the training ship, *Conway*.’

We went through a gate, on to a road shuttered with beeches, then over a stream and through a village where cottages stood back in gardens bright with flowers.

‘Tell me, what are the orange flowers like jesters’ caps?’ he asked, pointing to a mass of nasturtiums trailing against a wall. ‘I noticed them at railway stations in the north of Scotland.’ Then he added apologetically, ‘There’s not much chance of learning names of flowers at sea.’

I told him. Then I said, ‘Tell me more about when you were a boy.’ For I was treasuring each thing to weave into a garland in the days to come. ‘Had you any brothers or sisters?’

‘One sister,’ he told me, ‘five years younger than myself. I used to chase her with fistfuls of spiders. . . . She played the piano very well.’

‘Did you play, too?’

‘Well, yes. I was fond of it, but I didn’t have many lessons. It would have been expensive for us both to have had them. . . . My sister was very gifted altogether. My mother said she should have been the boy, because she was the clever one of the family.’

‘But you’re clever, too?’ I broke in.

‘Just average. . . . My sister was so quick. “You’re an old slow coach, Simon,” my mother used to say.’

There was a shadow of bitterness in his voice. The scars of childhood are slow to heal.

‘Please go on. Tell me more.’

‘Well, my sister, when she was fourteen, died at school, of meningitis. It was terrible. My mother had never wanted to send her to a boarding school. But people kept telling her it was a good thing to do. . . . But I’ve done all the talking. What about yourself?’

I had told him a good deal in my letters. Face to face, I felt suddenly shy. But soon I was talking about my gentle, idealistic father, and the white-walled farm in Pembroke with the fuchsia hedges and hayricks and the bark of the fox upon the morning air.

‘My mother died when I was born,’ I said. ‘So Aunt Kate came to live with us. My father used to say that he could never have managed but for her, for he was heart-broken at losing my mother. Besides, though he loved the farm and had always lived in the country, his mind was more than half on his poetry and stories and reviews. Aunt Kate was practical, and never happier than when she was in the dairy or the cowsheds. She was a wonderful cook, too. She taught me to bake bread and make pastry, to roast and to boil.’

I told him about my mother. I described the painting of her that hung in my father’s study. It showed a remote, lovely creature, with large eyes and hair dark as my own, wearing a satin dress tight at the waist, then falling in fluting folds of a green so delicate as to suggest one of those white blossoms that seems to have

absorbed into its petals the colouring of the foliage and stem.

As I talked I thought about my mother's short married life. She had made my father very happy. I, too, wanted to make someone happy . . . Yet I was a different person from my mother; and my life had taken a different course.

'Tell me about Oxford,' he said presently. 'What made you want to go there? To be independent?'

'Not so much that . . . I wanted to learn to think,' I said, 'to have an inner life of my own.'

He laughed. 'I'd have liked to go to Oxford,' he said, 'if I hadn't been a sailor. Uncle James—the one who was a clergyman—was a Balliol man. He and I were good friends. . . . And what about your teaching? Do you like that?'

'Oh, I do. . . . It's a bit topsy-turvy in an evacuated school. But I like it, even so.'

He had questioned me about the school in his letters. When I sent him a photograph of some children, he returned it, asking to be told the name of each. His favourite was Sara. She had large, quiet eyes, and a solemn face—like a Tudor princess.

★ ★ ★

We were walking downhill now, through the grass. The air was soft, and warm with the smell of grazing cows. A screen of elms—like trees in a Constable painting—hid the gasworks and the mushroom growth of brick houses to the west of the town. Only the cathed-

ral was visible with its lead-blue roof and silver-grey towers. The sun beat down on my arms.

‘Whew!’ said Simon. ‘This is real summer!’ And he took off his cap.

‘May I carry it, please?’ I asked. And I took it from his hand, turned it over and looked inside. It had a light blue lining with the name of the maker in gold.

‘What a pretty colour!’ I said.

‘Yes,’ he answered smiling. ‘But not as pretty as the dress.’

As we came into the town a child passed on the footpath. She wore a red frock and she was tugging at a huge dog. A gas mask was slung over her shoulder. Simon turned and looked at her.

‘What a mite!’ he said.

The sight of the gas mask reminded me that he would be going away soon. It was as if the sun had gone in.



When we sat down at the lunch table, he looked across at me.

‘Did you enjoy the walk?’ he asked.

‘Very much,’ I told him. ‘Did you?’

‘Yes, I did.’ He hesitated. Then he said, ‘I wish I could have stayed longer.’

‘I wish you could. . . . And I hope you’ll come again.’

A flush spread over his face, and, for a hardly per-

ceptible moment, a mist clouded the glass-clearness of his eyes.

He picked up the menu.

'There's no time to waste, if I'm to catch my bus,' he said.

His voice was brisk, almost curt. Yet, even as he spoke, I knew a strange happiness.

V

AUTUMN came with frosts and drifting leaves, and the robin's bitter-sweet song. Gales blustered under archways and whipped the waters of the moat. . . . Then it was winter, and the poplar trees naked again against the sky.

All the while there were Simon's letters. Sometimes one hard upon another. Sometimes after a lapse of time. They came in oblong blue-grey envelopes stamped 'Received from H.M. Ships', and fastened at one end with a label that bore the words 'Opened by the Examiner'. They were restrained, masculine letters, on paper that smelt faintly of tobacco.

They had a different quality, now that I had met him, had talked with him. As I read the pages—each one again and again—I heard the tone of his voice, saw the glance of eyes that seemed set on a distant horizon. I tried to piece together the things that he had told me of himself; and to fill in through my fancy the parts of his life that were still unknown to me. I wondered about his relationship with his mother. I asked myself what women he had known. I reflected on a childhood darkened by a sister's death. I tried to visualise life on board ship, and the dangers to which he was exposed. Picture after picture formed itself in my mind, then merged one into

another, making only a general blur as memory and imagination failed.

Love had entered my heart, gently and happily, like the song of birds. . . . A sun, newly risen, was gilding the world with its beams. Life was rich, full. My happiness overflowed, making me tolerant even of Mrs Devine.

I wrote to him of simple, sometimes trivial, things.

‘I enjoyed reading about the evacuees’ tea party,’ he said, in answer to a letter of mine. ‘And I’m still laughing over the old clergyman who lies on his bed each afternoon with an umbrella open above his head. His expression, “In order to ward off the glare of the sun” is like a sentence from a Latin grammar! I am entertained, too, by the archdeacon’s widow who told you she carries her prayer book in her hand, “to set an example to others”.’

One day I wrote about a walk on the Mendips with Doctor Laine. ‘The doctor is very kind,’ I said. ‘We had a wonderful afternoon.’ It did not enter my mind that the words could be misconstrued.

★ ★ ★

I was ill for some weeks that winter. Yet the time was not tedious to me. I would lie with eyes closed, my thoughts of Simon guiding me like a golden thread through the maze of my reveries. Or I looked through the window (my room was at the back now) at the naked trees in the hazel copse—the ground beneath

them a carpet of amber leaves. A lane ran by the side of the copse. Along it—in the morning and as dusk gathered—two great plough horses used to pass. I saw them through the branches, and I measured the time by their going. Morning and evening were heralded by a thud of hoofs and the jingle of harness. On a clear day the sun glittered on their brasses, and their glossy coats were the rich, strong red of a carnelian. Sometimes they passed by in mist. Grey, moving shapes. Thudding hoofs and jingling harness. Their return in the evening had a different quality. Then the hazels were black against the reddening sky. I imagined the big horses standing in their stables, in the light of a lantern, munching their hay. Their driver, too, would go back to his cottage; to a glowing hearth and wife and children. At this point the picture became jumbled in my mind with memories of the farm, and then with Simon. Simon and myself at our own fireside.

In the middle of December I received an envelope which enclosed a second one marked, 'To be opened on Christmas Day'.

When the time came, I found inside two pound-notes and a letter.

Forgive this ungracious way of sending a gift. I am rarely ashore, and then only for the briefest time. Please choose something you will like. . . .

★ ★ ★

In February there was a letter with a London post-mark. He was away from the ship for a few days, he said, and would be travelling to Taunton on Friday evening (it was now Thursday) to see the parents of a young sailor who was involved in some trouble. He had been a decent boy. Simon wanted to do what he could for him.

My train is due at Westbury Junction at twenty past five. If you could meet me there—on the platform—I should be very pleased.

I would meet him, indeed. But was he expecting a reply? The letter was written from Montague Square. An answer by post might not reach him. Yet not to answer seemed casual. Or he might think I was not able to come. I could, of course, send a telegram. I turned the matter over in my mind, trying to decide what I would have liked, myself, in a similar case. I would certainly have been pleased to have a telegram. My father would have felt the same. When I went away from home even for a few days he used to say: 'Send your old father a telegram, Anna.' He liked to send one himself at the least excuse. Yes, I would send Simon a telegram. I thought it out: VERY PLEASED TO MEET YOU AT WESTBURY ANNA.

If it missed him, no harm would have been done.

★ ★ ★

'You look on top of the world!' they said to me that

day in the staff-room at school. On top of the world. That was how I felt as I went from class to class. I was thinking about what train I would catch, what clothes I would wear. I was wondering, too, where I would sleep on Friday night. If I were to come back to Wells it might mean cutting short our time together. I would have to see. Perhaps there would be an inn at Westbury. I was glad that, as it happened, my Aunt Kate was away at Bath, for she did not always remember that I was no longer a child.



My train reached Westbury nearly an hour before Simon's was due.

I went out of the station, then along a road between hedges black against a sky that sparkled with sunlight. A knife-edged wind blew in sudden sharp blasts that cut through me, making me feel thin and unsubstantial, like a ghost. Two swans passed overhead, their wings throbbing. The underside of their bodies was dark against the sun, but a silver radiance played upon their backs and swaying, outstretched necks. They looked unreal—like creatures out of a legend of long ago. Were they, perhaps, an augury? And if so, of what? Soon, they were lost to view. But in a moment they were back again, wheeling and swooping in the very joy of their flight—coming, now, towards each other, as if in greeting; now, again, moving apart as though set each on a separate way. Presently, ahead of me I saw a pool,

grey as steel, and surrounded by reeds and little purple-red alder trees, and there, again, circling above it, were the swans, their wings throbbing, their necks swaying. They glided down, breaking the water into splinters of silver. They were stately and decorative, but more ordinary now. The magic had gone.

At a corner of the road I came to an inn built of grey stone. It had a flat, dead look. There was no knocker, no bell. I rapped with my bare knuckles, and stood waiting. I was turning to go, when a woman with a large, unwelcoming face opened the door.

‘Would you have a room for tonight, if I need it?’ I asked, tentatively. ‘Or, perhaps, two rooms?’ I was wondering what Simon’s plans would be—whether he would break his journey or go on to Taunton.

‘No rooms in these parts,’ the woman answered sullenly. ‘Troops in every house.’

I turned away. I was not greatly troubled. Things would work out.

When I got back to the station, there was still half an hour to wait. I went into the refreshment room. It was crowded with young soldiers wearing tin helmets and with packs on their backs. I stood at the counter sipping a cup of tea and listening to the talk of the soldiers. A bun I tried to eat seemed only to choke me. So I went out again on to the platform and threw the remains to a little troop of fluttering sparrows.

There was a rose-coloured glow in the sky, and the

black shapes of trucks and engines in a siding had a poetic quality. The noise of the shunting and the hiss of steam was strangely poetic, too. I wondered why this should be. Had it to do with my mood? Or was it always so at a country station in the evening?

Suddenly, I was beset with fears. Suppose he did not come? Suppose we were to miss each other, for the platform was becoming crowded now. . . . I thrust my fears from me and went into the waiting room, for my feet were numb with cold.

But it was hardly less cold there, and inexpressibly dreary. There was an elderly woman dressed in shabby black, with a mouth that drooped at the corners; and a youth with a pimply face who stared in front of him in a dumb, hopeless way. I wondered if he was going into one of the services. Opposite him sat a girl wearing shiny artificial silk stockings and patent leather shoes with absurdly high heels. Her face was over made up, and the mascara thick upon her lashés. Perhaps it was to give pleasure to a friend coming on leave? I looked at my own face in the mirror. It was pale under the little emerald hat, and there were dark rings under my eyes. I hoped Simon would not notice.

I went out again on to the platform. It was hard to know where to stand—whether at the front of the train, or the back. Towards the back might be best, I decided. Then I would see each carriage as it passed. Perhaps he would be looking out of the window. . . . The signal clanked. People were looking expectant

and picking up their cases. I heard the thunder of the train. 'Oh God, let him come,' I said.

★ ★ ★

The passengers had surely all got out and still he had not appeared. Then I caught sight of him standing on the platform at the rear of the train. I could not be sure whether he had seen me. I went up to him—not watching him from a distance as that night at Wells.

'I'm very pleased to see you,' I said eagerly. 'I was afraid you'd not come . . . or that I might miss you in the crowd.'

'I don't see why that should be,' he answered dryly. His eyes were smiling.

We went into the refreshment room. I took a table while he brought cups of tea and buns. This time I enjoyed the bun: I was surprised to find how hungry I was.

As we drank our tea Simon noticed my case.

'What's that for?' he asked, with a look of amusement.

'It's my night things,' I explained. 'In case I can't get back to Wells. . . . There aren't many trains.'

'And where do you intend to stay?' His mouth twitched as though he were trying to keep back a smile.

'I don't know. There's nowhere here. I asked at the inn.'

'No room at the inn,' he murmured.

He was silent for a few minutes. Then he said: 'I

thought you would have to get back, after we had some dinner together, in which case I intended either to break my journey here or get on to Taunton to-night. . . . But if you're not in a hurry perhaps we could find somewhere to stay. What about Frome? Do you think that would be all right?'

'Quite all right,' I said.

'Very well then, we'll try. . . . If this doesn't work out, I can probably get you back to Wells by road.'

'Oh, I hope not,' I said. The words had come tumbling out.

★ ★ ★

We sat opposite each other in the little train to Frome. The carriage was empty but for ourselves. It was dusk now. To the west the sky was gashed with a violent red. I looked now at the wild splendour of the setting sun, now at Simon. He seemed more careworn than when I had seen him at Wells, but he was no less wonderful for that.

As I looked up at him, his eyes looked back into mine, and, then, at the case resting on my knees.

'What will your aunt say? . . . I mean about your being away for the night?' he asked.

'Nothing,' I said. 'She doesn't know. She's at Bath. . . . Besides, I'm with you.' I saw the amusement in his eyes and the smile playing on his lips.

★ ★ ★

It was dark when we got out at Frome. We walked by

the light of his torch down flights of steps, along streets and echoing alleys. We could find nowhere to stay.

‘I shan’t have to go back to Wells, shall I?’ I asked anxiously.

‘You shall not indeed,’ he told me. There was warmth in his voice, and his arm was through mine.

‘We can try Warminster,’ he said.

‘Yes,’ I said. ‘A bus goes there.’

We went into a call-box. I held the torch while he looked up the number of the Bath Arms Hotel. He remembered the name, for he had stayed there once. After a few minutes he put down the receiver. ‘That’s settled,’ he said. ‘There are two rooms available.’

We were far back in the queue for the bus. When it came in, he suggested that we should give our places to two women laden with baskets of shopping. It meant waiting half an hour. I was touched by his thought for others. Besides, I asked nothing better than to be standing at his side under the stars.

‘Did you tell them at the school? About meeting me?’ he asked.

‘No. But they said I looked “on top of the world”!’ We laughed.

‘I haven’t seen my Christmas present,’ he said later. ‘The slippers you said you bought?’

‘They’re in my case,’ I told him.

★ ★ ★

It was after nine o’clock. We were eating spam, with

beetroot and cold potatoes, in the dining room of the Bath Arms.

‘Did you get my telegram?’ I asked. I had not given it a thought till then.

‘Telegram? No. What telegram?’

I explained. No, he had not received it. He had been out of London the night before, with an officer at Chatham.

‘There was no need to have sent a telegram,’ he said with an edge to his voice. ‘What did you put in it?’

I told him. I felt like a child being made to confess some misdemeanour.

He was silent. Then he said: ‘Mrs Oddie will have steamed it open. Landladies are like that. They want to know everything.’ Then he added, ‘I never send a wire unless it’s something of real importance.’

No more was said. But it was as if a cloud had gathered.

While we were going upstairs, he asked again about the slippers.

‘Would you like to see them?’ I said.

‘I would, very much.’

I put them into his hands as he stood in my room with the door neither shut nor open. He held them, smoothing the pile with his fingers. ‘They’re pretty,’ he said, giving them back to me, ‘and I wish you sweet dreams.’

I was happy again. Yet it was not the shining happiness before the mention of the telegram.

★ ★ ★

I was down first in the morning. I sat on a chair in the hall, watching a porter in shirt sleeves as he shook the mats on the door-step, then flung them on to the floor, as though he had a grudge against each.

'You should have started your breakfast,' Simon said when we sat down at the table. His mind was on trains. 'We'll need a taxi,' he murmured. 'A confounded nuisance what they cost.'

★ ★ ★

We were back again on the platform at Westbury. He was waiting for the train to Taunton. I was going to Wells.

'I'm glad we were able to meet,' he said.

'So am I. I've enjoyed it.'

'A pity, though, you sent that telegram.'

The engine drew up with a screech of brakes and a hiss of steam. He had shaken hands and was getting into the train when he turned.

'Give my love to little Sara,' he said.

Without looking back a second time, he made his way along the crowded corridor.

What a fuss about a telegram, I thought. Yet it was nice of him to have remembered little Sara.

VI

THE incident of the telegram puzzled me. It kept recurring to my mind. I thought of talking it over with Doctor Laine. Then I abandoned the idea. It might seem a criticism of Simon, an act of disloyalty to him. Besides, I did not want to admit his faults to myself—still less to another. Indeed, as time passed he became installed, once again, without flaw, in the world of my dreams. I thought how fine he had looked as he sat opposite me in the train to Frome; how splendid it had been to walk at his side under the stars. I pictured him on board ship—alone on the bridge in the long watches of the night. I thought how one day he would come again.

This loving at a distance had a shining, golden quality. Its joys could be called on at will. I knew nothing of its pitfalls.

As the days and the months slipped by, the bond between us was strengthening. From time to time two letters came within a day or so of each other, or even on the same day. They were always restrained. But they were less formal now. Once, when I had begun 'Dear Seafarer' and, then, in the next letter, reverted to a conventional beginning, I found squeezed in the margin of his reply: 'Please write "Dear Seafarer" as before.'

He had confidence in me, it seemed. For when a cousin in Montreal had suggested that, being a bachelor, he might like to contribute towards the education of her adopted son, he enclosed the letter for me to see.

‘What do you think?’ he wrote. ‘It seems to me to be asking a lot. Still, one must be kind and do one’s duty.’

Now and again, when a letter could be posted ashore—and so be uncensored—he told me about his life on board. He would describe one of his colleagues, or say something about the food, or the cramped, difficult conditions.

Once, a ship coming up the Tyne had collided with his own in a thick fog.

There was a thundering, splintering crash. . . . No lives were lost and the responsibility was not mine. But even so I take it to heart.

I loved him—for such is the mystery of love—for something to which I could put no name. But I loved him yet the more for his devotion to duty and for his kindness. I remembered how he had found time to buy the piqué collar, when he was leaving to join his ship. I thought of the journey to Taunton to help the young sailor; and how, that night at Frome, he suggested that we gave up our places in the bus.

When Doctor Laine asked me what it was I found lovable in my seafarer, I thought for a moment. Then I said, ‘It’s partly his kindness . . . and steadfastness.

He makes me think of the house in the Bible that was built on a rock. . . . He would never let anyone down.'

★ ★ ★

In October Simon asked me if I would try to buy him a wrist-watch. The request came in a registered envelope, along with a letter and a wad of pound notes.

I was walking back in pouring rain in the black-out after being ashore at Newcastle for a few days during boiler cleaning. . . . I somehow missed my step, for the next thing I knew was that I was over the quayside into the river. Some police in a launch heard the splash and hauled me on board—none too soon, either, for the weight of my great-coat was dragging me under. I spent the rest of the night wrapped in blankets on a minesweeper that was moored nearby. The case I was carrying—labelled with my name and ship—was brought back to me the following morning. But the contents had been rifled. Everything of value gone, including my pen and watch. I had broken the strap of the watch that evening—otherwise I would have been wearing it. I can somehow make do without a pen, but a watch is almost an essential. . . . If you can get me one, I shall indeed be grateful. But I fear such a thing may be unobtainable. Please also buy something for yourself—perhaps a piece of jewellery, or whatever you fancy. . . .

I pictured it all. The solitary figure in the black,

deluging rain, his collar turned up, his case in his hand. Then, the splash that might have cost him his life. . . . I was proud that he had turned to me; had asked me to shop for him.

★ ★ ★

The next day I went to Bath. It was one of those mornings so still that the bright, drifting leaves seem scarcely to move upon the frosted air. Trees were etched against a green and silver sky. It was like a sky in a Pre-Raphaelite picture. Its radiance flooded the landscape, accentuating colour and detail. Through the window of the bus I watched the pied, tumbling flight of lapwing over red ploughed earth. On stone walls mosses and ferns, withered grasses and crimsoned bramble leaves stood out in minute exactitude. The scene entranced me. Yet, from time to time I turned away. And taking the letter from my bag I read it anew. I had a mission to carry out. I would not rest until it was done.

★ ★ ★

In every shop it was the same.

'I'm sorry, madam, we have no watches,' said the courteous, bald-headed man in Gilmers.

'Not a watch in the place,' said the stout little woman in Mallorys.

'You won't get a watch in fifty miles radius,' said a man with a walrus moustache in Dickinsons.

I had tried eleven shops in all.

Then I found a clockmaker in an alley. The man behind the counter was frail and bent. He wore an apron and steel-rimmed spectacles. Yes, he had a second-hand watch. It had a luminous face and was made of stainless steel. Just the watch for a man in the Services.

I posted it to Simon, there and then, by registered mail. And with it I enclosed my own pen. It was a small green pen, made for a woman.

It was late afternoon, and I had still bought nothing for myself. I walked the length of Milsom Street, then back down Broad Street, looking into the windows of jewellers and antique shops. There was so much to look at; so many things to choose from. Old silver, Glass, China. Enamelled brooches, Bracelets. I would have liked a clock, but those I saw were too large or over-elaborate. I thought, too, of a pair of ear-rings. Then, in a window at the bottom of Broad Street, I saw the casket. The lid and the bowl were edged with gilt; and on the lid was painted a gold-finch perching on a spray of gorse. All was in perfect detail—the crimson and black head, the biscuit-coloured breast, the yellow-barred wings, the tiny claws.

I bought the casket. While I had tea in Fortts, I wrote:

Dear Simon,

I have posted you a watch. It is second-hand, but I hope it will keep good time. I tried twelve shops. I

also enclosed my pen. Please keep it as long as you like—if you do not find it uncomfortably small. I am only glad for you to have it.

I have bought myself a little china casket with a goldfinch on the lid. It is Royal Worcester and very beautiful. I look forward to showing it to you one day.

Here is the change from the money you sent. Thank you again for the present.

Anna.

I was proud to be returning three pounds out of the twelve that he had sent me.

On the way back in the bus, I thought about the watch and the pen. Especially the pen. It would be with him on his voyages, in the perils of the sea. One day it would come back to me, and he would tell me of all that had befallen him with the pen in his pocket, resting against his heart. It would be a symbol of my love. Of our love, maybe:

*My true love hath my heart and I have his
By just exchange one to the other given.*

★ ★ ★

In his next letter I read:

The watch and pen were waiting for me on our return to harbour. How good of you! But now you have no pen? And poor feet! All that walking on my account! I look forward to seeing the casket, but fear it is a small reward for so much labour.

VII

CHRISTMAS had come and gone, and there had been no news of Simon. Not for two months. I was haunted by a sickening dread. In the morning, while it was still dark, I heard the click of the gate and steps on the path, then the rattle of the post box. I would slip downstairs in my dressing gown—quietly, that my preoccupation might not be known to others—gather the letters into a pile, look at them one by one, then go upstairs heavy at heart, to begin another day.

I listened to the radio, scanned the newspapers. Ships were being lost, and more often than not the names were not given. If anything were to happen to him how would I know? Mrs Fielden had been our only friend in common.

At that time, too, I dreamed strange dreams.

In one I saw the face of Simon, chalk-white, like a mask, against a background of green, heaving waves. In another Simon and myself were moving hand in hand in a swirling crowd. It was some kind of carnival; for there were streamers flying and fantastic animal heads and shouting and laughing. Then, in the surge of people, my hand was torn from his and I could no longer see him. I shouted, 'Simon, Simon', and I heard him call to me in answer, 'Anna, Anna,

Anna'. But his voice became fainter and fainter until it was lost in the roar of the crowd. . . . And, yet, it was no longer the crowd, but the sea, howling and yelping, and wind whining in the rigging.

★ ★ ★

When the middle of January came and still there was no news, I decided to telephone to Mrs Oddie. I was reluctant to do this, for I remembered Simon's displeasure about the wire. Even when my mind was made up, a couple of days elapsed before I did so. Each time I tried to use the telephone at Chantry House, there was a coming and going through the hall and an opening and shutting of doors. Then I went out to a call-box, only to find that I had not brought the necessary change. I was glad of an excuse to delay. There was always the chance that a letter might come in the morning.

Finally I went to the post office. It took me a long time to get through. I had first to ask for 'Enquiries', for I did not know the number. My heart was thumping.

'Mrs Oddie speaking.' The voice was genteel. Then, in answer to my queries, 'No, the commander is not at home. There has been no news for some time. Shall I take a message?'

'No, thank you. It's all right.' I put down the receiver without giving my name, thankful to have learnt so much. If anything had happened to Simon, his landlady would surely have been told.

★ ★ ★

A fortnight passed. Then two letters came by the same post.

The first was a pencilled scribble written at sea early in December. In it I read :

We are having a busy time and little opportunity for despatching mail. In addition, I sprained my hand which makes writing very difficult.

The second bore a Newcastle postmark. It ran :

We are back in port after an unusually prolonged voyage. . . . A letter reached me today from Mrs Oddie in which she says that a woman's voice has been asking for me on the telephone. I do hope it was not you.

My feelings were mixed. I felt guilty. And yet not guilty. Why should he want to hide my existence from Mrs Oddie? Was it not a natural and a friendly thing that I had done? Why make a mountain out of it? Besides, did I not love him? Then the thought of my love for Simon brought a fresh sense of guilt. Did he mean me to love him? Did he love me in return? I remembered the strange moment of my happiness at the lunch table at Wells, when a mist had hidden the glass-clearness of his eyes.

Had I deluded myself? Had I been playing with a shadow? I wanted to know the truth—to know what was in his heart. I wanted to tell him, humbly and simply, what was in my own. In the situation in which I found myself, what else was left for me to do?

How else convince him that the telephone call to Mrs Oddie had not been prompted by idle curiosity? Tell a man that I loved him, before he had spoken words of love to me? I thought of what, had she known, would have been my Aunt Kate's shocked reaction. But then, I was not sure that I accepted my aunt's ideas on the role of a woman in love. 'You can hide yourself in a band-box, Anna—the man who loves you will find you out!' I could hear her saying it. . . . But what of the Dominican at Oxford? 'There may well be a time in the life of a woman,' he had said, 'when she should have the courage to confess her love.' If, by so doing, he explained, she can be of help to a man, can remove, maybe, a misunderstanding.

That night I wrote:

Dear Simon,

Yes, I did telephone to Mrs Oddie, I was frightened that something had happened to you. And so I was dreadfully worried—for I love you very much. I don't know if you mean me to love you all this much. If so, couldn't I belong to you permanently, please? Then it wouldn't be quite so bad when you are away.

Anna.

I hurried out into the darkness and dropped the letter into the box—quickly, for fear I might lose courage and change my mind. On my way back across the green I heard the organ in the cathedral. Its notes

wove a wondrous pattern of gold upon the blackness of the night.

When I came in, the lounge was empty. I sat by the embers, trying to think calmly over what I had done. At one moment I was filled with panic, and then with a sweet, wild joy.

★ ★ ★

The next day the doctor stopped me. He was getting into his car outside the Deanery.

'Any news, Anna?' he asked, his face crinkling not into its usual smile but into a network of anxious sympathy. He had been asking me the same question for weeks.

'Yes,' I told him. 'Two letters at once.' Then, speaking in a rush, as if I had been running, I said, 'I wish he'd come home and marry me.'

'Indeed I wish it too, with all my heart, if it is for your happiness.' The horse-like face was lit with kindness. 'I'm only surprised you haven't married before. You could make someone very happy.'

As I went on, I was thinking of what the doctor had said. I thought of young men I had known at Oxford. They seemed remote, now: like characters in a book. I thought, in particular, of Martin, with his kind, pink face and his heavy-lidded sleepy eyes. I had felt almost guilty in the autumn when he had come to Wells, to see me, during his leave from the East. . . . It was Simon whom I wanted to make happy.

★ ★ ★

[60]

The answer to my letter came quickly. Almost by return. The postmark was Newcastle-on-Tyne.

I was very glad to have your letter. I expect to be here for a little while. There is no prospect of full leave—though it is more than due—but I may get a few days to myself. Whether it will be long enough to come to Somerset is another matter. A pity the distance is so great—I think you might have liked to see the river here and the ship, though with war-time regulations I could not take you on board. However, what with bad weather and the general discomfort of travelling in these days, the journey up north would be too much for you.

It's very good of you to write to me as you did—to tell me what is in your mind. But, dear Anna, you don't yet know me, do you?

He wanted to see me. What more could I ask?

I wrote back:

The journey would not be too much. I could come at a week-end.

VIII

WHEN I came in from school on the Friday evening before the half-term holiday, my aunt said, 'Only a moment ago there was a telephone call from Newcastle. It was Simon, but he wouldn't leave a message.'

I had wished, sometimes, that he would telephone when he was ashore. Now it had happened. And I had been out. My disappointment was intense. I stayed indoors the rest of the evening, hoping against hope he would call a second time.

Early in the morning, there was a telegram: SHALL BE IN LONDON FOR WEEKEND WESTWAY HOTEL ENDSLEIGH STREET SIMON

Just that. There was no suggestion that I should join him. Yet why the telephone call? And now the wire? I remembered what he had said at Warminster: 'I never send a wire unless it's something of real importance.' Did he want me? I could not be sure. I thought it over and over. Yes, I would go to London, here and now. I would be there if he needed me. If he didn't, well, I could occupy myself.

I went to my aunt, to tell her.

She was standing at the dressing-table with her back to me, doing her hair. She wore a black celanese

petticoat, and her plump arms were raised above her head. Her face smiled at me in the mirror.

'You're an early bird!' she said.

'I'm going to London,' I answered. 'Simon's there, for the week-end.'

I tried to sound casual, but my voice rang out, as though I were a herald making a proclamation.

She turned round, the comb still in her uplifted hand. 'Good gracious! But where will you stay? It's impossible to get a roof over your head! . . . Has he arranged anything?'

I was impatient to be off.

'No. No,' I said. 'I'll find somewhere.'

'Well, I don't know . . . all this gallivanting. In my day—'

'It's different now. . . . What about the women in the services? I'm sorry. I must go.'

She shook her head. 'Have it your own way, Anna. It's no good arguing. You're as wilful as your father.'

When I had packed my case, I looked in again.

'Don't worry,' I said. 'There's always Kathleen's flat in York Place.' And I kissed her red cheeks.

As I walked to the station, I thought of Kathleen with her shock of auburn hair and her friendly, green-glinting eyes. We had been at school together. Now she was an almoner in a London hospital. She would welcome me. But, on second thoughts, did I want to have to 'explain' Simon just then—to have to bring him to the flat? Kathleen, in the warmth of her hospitality, would insist.

I could hear her: 'But, my dear, where are you going to eat? Bring him along. I can always slap up some kind of meal.' When we got there, there would be a swarm of people, a continual coming and going. I could not face it. Besides, I did not know how Simon would feel. Better, this time, to see him quietly, on his own.

Snow lay on the ground. The train was late and badly heated. I stood in the corridor for part of the journey. Then a soldier offered me his pack to sit on.

At Paddington I bought a ticket to Euston Square. Up till now, the thought of my own boldness, along with the prospect of seeing Simon, had carried me on my way in a mood of elation—as if I were being borne on wings to my goal. The snow and the late train and the soldier giving me his pack had been part of an adventure. But in the drabness of the underground misgivings assailed me. Perhaps Simon would not be pleased to see me. Perhaps he would not be there. The telegram might have been meant to give an address for letters.

My heart was pounding as I asked for him at the reception desk. Yes, I was told, he had arrived, but, as the hotel was full, he had been given a room in a house a few doors away. Perhaps I would find him there. I went along the street and rang the bell. A man in shirt-sleeves answered.

'The gentleman has not long gone out,' he told me.

I walked the length of Endsleigh Street, then into some neighboring streets hoping to find somewhere

to stay. Several of the hotels had been requisitioned. Those that remained were full. In desperation, I made enquiries at a hostel for Dutch sailors. Men with light hair and blue eyes gathered around me, smiling and talking unintelligibly.

Then I found myself in Taviton Street. Half way down I saw in a window a card with the words 'Room and Breakfast'. It was a shabby, uncared-for looking house, but it must once have been elegant. To this day—though the door is now blocked and the house has become part of an adjoining hotel—it stands out from the ~~fest~~ of the street by reason of a little balcony and a fan-shaped splay of spikes that jut at right angles from the wall. . . .

A small woman with red hair and sharp eyes answered the bell. Yes, she had accommodation. She went up the stairs in front of me, and opened the door into a narrow room on the first floor. The wall-paper was patterned with faded crimson leaves and stained with damp; it hung loose in places. An old-fashioned gas heater, consisting of three black upright pipes with a burner underneath, stood near a french window which opened on to the balcony. The room was evidently part of a larger one that had been divided.

When I was alone, I went to the window, and, using all my strength, I thrust it open. The hinges were clogged with dust and spiders' webs. I stood for a moment on the balcony, thankful for the fresh air and the snowflakes drifting against my cheeks. Then

I came in again, and taking some paper from my case I wrote: 'Dear Simon, I am at number six Taviston Street.'

I underlined the word 'six', and signed my name.

I went out round the corner into Endsleigh Street, and rang the bell of the house where he was staying. The man in shirt sleeves again opened the door. I handed him the note and asked him to give it to Simon when he came in.

'Very good,' he said.

I disliked the look in his piggy eyes, and wished I had not had to call a second time.

It was four o'clock when I got back to my room, but under the leaden sky it might have been later. Suddenly I felt hungry, and remembered that I had eaten nothing since morning. I took out a paper bag with some bread and cheese in it that I had brought to have in the train. The bread was stale and the cheese had turned a wizened yellow. The sight and the taste took away my appetite, yet without allaying my hunger. I drank water out of a cracked tooth-mug that was decorated with the crowned head of King George the Sixth. Then I put a match to the gas heater (it made a spluttering noise, as if it took exception to being lit) and, drawing a chair close to it, I tried to read a book. I turned the pages restlessly. There was a passage about a may tree showering its starlike blossoms on to the grass. . . . From time to time I stood up, opened the window and went out on to the balcony, hoping always that I would see

Simon below. I was uneasy for fear, when he came, I might not hear the bell, for it seemed that apart from myself the house was empty. It was silent as a tomb. I went on to the landing and listened, then tried to switch on the light on the stairs. There was no bulb in the fitting.

Darkness fell. Again I went on to the landing. Still there was no sound, no light. Then, going back into my room, I sat in the darkness, close to the window, with the black-out curtains drawn back. I could hear the footsteps of passers-by, and, now and then, the sound of a car muffled by the snow.

It must have been about seven o'clock when someone stopped on the pavement below. I went out on to the balcony and looked down. A man was standing on the steps.

'Is that you, Simon?' I called.

'Yes, Anna, it is.' His voice came up to me, clear and strong.

'I'll be down.' I called again.

I went back into the room, drew the curtains, and switched on the light.

★ ★ ★

He took my two hands into his, then dropped them, and followed me up the stairs.

'To think I should find you here!' he said as he sat on the bed at my side. Then he said again: 'To find you here! I stayed in this house . . . some years ago now . . . it must have been in this very room, before it

was divided.' He stood up, walked to the window, then came back and sat down. 'I was studying with a coach in Tavistock Square, for the Extra Master's examination. It was a pleasant, well-kept house in those days . . . very different from this.' He looked about the room distastefully. 'I'll find you something better.'

He wanted me to leave Taverton Street there and then. I refused. I had no wish to waste our time together searching for a room. Besides, was it not wonderful that, in all London, I had come to this house, this room, in which he himself had stayed? My first letter to him had been recovered from the débris. Now this. Our relationship was full of strange, improbable things.

'No, no,' I insisted. 'Please let it be.'

'As you like, then, Anna.' He spoke gently, as though he were calming a child. 'But we must have some dinner.'

We went out into the street, then through the darkness of Gordon Square. Snow lay in great daubs on roofs and roadways. An owl hooted from a bombed house. . . . My hand rested in Simon's. I would never, never let go of him any more.

We had dinner in Great Russell Street, in a restaurant crowded with men and women in uniform.

'I wish you'd had the chicken,' he said, eyeing my withered-looking fillet of fish.

'No, really, I like fish.' I had chosen it because the chicken seemed exorbitantly dear.

'You may be right,' he said. 'Chicken is probably cat!'

He had telephoned to me at Wells, he explained, to say that he had a three days leave and to ask if I would like to come to Newcastle. He could have got me a room at the station hotel and taken me to Tyne-mouth where the ship was. He had been disconcerted when my aunt had replied and unable to think what message to leave. So, at a loss what to do, he decided to come to London.

'Now you're here, too, it's all for the best,' he went on.

'Are you pleased I've come?' I asked.

'Very pleased indeed.'

'Did you mean me to come, when you sent the telegram?'

'I wished you could . . . but it was difficult, Anna . . . such short notice . . . and no certainty there'd be a room for you.'

When we said good-night in Taviton Street, he touched my cheek with his lips.

★ ★ ★

On Sunday we walked, hardly noticing the distances we covered. Down Tottenham Court Road. Across Soho Square. Through a tangle of streets into Shaftesbury Avenue. There was still snow on the ground. Simon laughed at a chiffon scarf I wore, and, taking off his muffler, he wrapped it about me. 'I'm hardened to all weathers,' he said.

We stopped for lunch in a restaurant in Wardour Street. At the table next to us two Commandos were talking in French to a priest with a sallow, aquiline face.

Then on again. Across Trafalgar Square. Along the Mall into St James's Park. The water was crowded with gulls and tufted duck with enamel-white flanks, and orange circles about their eyes.

My other life had dropped from me. Only the present was real, and over it there hung a shimmering radiance. I was learning about Simon things unknown to me before or only guessed at. We talked of pictures and music, books we had read, plays we had seen. He told me about his voyages.

The lounge in the hotel was empty most of the evening. We drew our chairs to the fire, and read a magazine together, waiting for each other at the end of the page. I noticed his neat, quick-moving fingers, and I was entranced when he took his watch to pieces, then put it together again.

Still there was tomorrow. He would call for me early, he said.

IX

TEN o'clock struck. Then half-past ten. Still Simon had not come. It was cold in my room, and I had no coppers for the gas meter. I went out on to the pavement. He would be here at any moment now. I did not go further than the corner, for fear of losing sight of the house, for I did not know from which end of the street to expect him. I had walked to the corner for the third time when I saw him coming from the opposite direction. I waved, and went to meet him.

He did not wave back. When I came up to him he said, 'Have you been out? I thought you were waiting for me to call? It's late.' It was the tone he had used at Warminster about the telegram, but sharper. Then, before I had time to answer, he went on: 'The fellow at the house, where I am, delayed me talking. . . . He says you kept calling on Saturday, before I got back. What on earth for?'

I tried to explain. He was not listening; and his face was flushed.

'Come on,' he said roughly, quickening his pace.

He had an appointment with a tailor in Jermyn Street. We arranged the evening before that I should go with him. 'You won't mind waiting for me a few minutes?' he had said.

We walked, without speaking, past St Pancras church, and out on to the Euston Road, then joined a bus queue. I was standing in front of Simon. A number fourteen bus came swaying up. People ahead of me began to get on. I supposed that I was meant to do the same. But, when I was already on the platform and the conductor was about to ring the bell, I looked back to see Simon still on the pavement. I jumped off, only to hear his voice ring out, 'Really, you are utterly stupid. Couldn't you see I was getting on?' People stared at him, and at me.

'As if I was not late enough already,' he muttered.

Tears stung my eyes, and I answered crossly, 'Perhaps you'd rather I didn't come.'

'As you please,' he said.

★ ★ ★

It is hard to recall the rest of the day clearly. . . . After a volcanic eruption a mist hangs upon the landscape, dimming the colours and blunting the outlines.

I was no longer conscious of my previous happiness. Or, if I did think of it, it was with the searing pain that accompanies the memory of a shattered joy . . . a prayer granted yet snatched away in the moment of its granting . . . a flower opening its petals only to be trampled in the dust. Everything pointed to one end—or so it seemed to me then—the fact that, after all, he could care nothing for me.

I was standing on the platform of I do not know what tube station, staring miserably into the black-

ness of the tunnel, when I heard him say, 'You certainly were stupid!'

'And what if I was?' I whipped back. 'You're not perfect either.' And then, thinking of the fuss over the wire and the telephone to Mrs Oddie, I flung at him, 'Yet I've put up with your odd ways!'

'Odd?' he said. 'That's not kind.'

His voice was quiet, but cold as ice.

I was sorry. I wanted to unsay my words. But I did not know how. I tried in the train, but, unless I were to shout, I could not make myself heard above its roar. When we were in a station he kept his face hidden behind a newspaper.

★ ★ ★

I sat in the tailor's shop, waiting for him wretchedly. Then we walked along Jermyn Street, and out into Piccadilly. A thaw had set in. Sleet was falling, and the pavements were wet with slush. We went into a restaurant for lunch.

We had to queue for a table, and, when we sat down, conversation was impossible for the din of voices and the clatter of crockery. I ate only a little of my first course and refused a second.

Then we walked again. We seemed to walk endlessly and without purpose. He said he had something to buy, but he did not tell me what it was.

★ ★ ★

Late that afternoon we were crossing the street where

Byng Place comes into Gordon Square, at the corner by the Apostolic Church. Great flakes of snow had begun to fall, melting as they met the wet pavements. 'I'll try again to put things right,' I thought.

'I didn't mean to upset you,' I said gently. 'You know that.'

His answer took me unawares.

'It's a pity,' he said, 'you don't marry your friend the doctor. You admire him so much.'

'But, Simon,' I said, my voice rising in desperate astonishment, 'it's absurd. He's old enough to be my father. . . . Besides, I've told you, it's you I love. You, only.'

'I shall never marry,' he said.

Then, with mockery in his voice, he went on, 'I know a fellow whose wife left him while he was at sea.'

'But I wouldn't leave you.'

'And I know a man—he commanded a mine-sweeper at Scapa—who left his wife.'

'But you wouldn't do that?'

'No, I wouldn't.' He spoke more calmly now.

It was dusk and time for me to go to the train.

We called at Taviton Street. Simon waited in the hall while I fetched my case. The sight of the little, shabby room cut me to the heart. How far away it seemed—two evenings ago—when he had taken my hands into his and followed me up the stairs.

When I came down, I stood for a moment at his

side, praying that, even now, happiness might be restored. He took my case.

‘We’d better get along,’ he murmured.

★ ★ ★

‘I’ll say good-bye,’ he said to me on the platform at Paddington. ‘And please don’t write till you hear from me. I shall be changing ship.’ His words were like a blind rattling down a window pane.

I watched his back as he walked away in the murky, yellow light. I was so tired that I would gladly have died. •

X

IF ONLY they would leave me alone, I thought. But they asked me question upon question—my aunt, my colleagues at the school, the old ladies in the guest house. How was my friend? Did I enjoy the weekend? Had I a gay time in London? In the way that happens, my relationship with Simon had, at least to some extent, become public property, without my having meant it to be so. Only Doctor Laine, sensing, it seemed, that all was not well, made no comment. But the faded eyes looked at me kindly from under the crinkled lids.

Day followed day with no news of Simon. Life had become a dull, lustreless grey. There was no joy, no expectation of things to come. Perhaps he did not intend to write at all. I was disillusioned and disposed to self-pity. Then, I thought of others more unfortunate than myself. There was the golden-haired biology mistress whose husband had left her; the doctor's receptionist whose fiancé was killed in a 'plane crash. There were women in fiction. Anna Karenina . . . Tess . . . Madame Bovary . . . Desdemona . . . Dido . . . Ariadne. So many names that I smiled despite myself.

I wished that I had not hit back at him in London.

If I had held my peace, the day might have passed happily. As it was, I had gained nothing. Besides, it was small wonder if his nerves were frayed, what with the war and life on board ship. And yet, when I could have been a comfort to him, I had been quick to take offence. It was likely that the man who had opened the door to me in Endsleigh Street had made some unpleasant or derogatory remark about my having called. That would explain Simon's displeasure.

Even so, need he have been quite so ill-humoured?

* * *

'I'm disillusioned,' I confessed to the doctor, as I sat in his study one evening.

'I know,' he said, his brow wrinkling in sympathy.

'I can't see why he need have been so cross. . . . He behaves as though he didn't want to acknowledge my existence.'

'You belong to his secret life, I imagine, Anna,' he said, smiling. I noticed how his smile differed from Simon's. Simon's came and went, quick as light. The doctor's was always there, hovering upon his lips, hardly more than a shadow.

'He can't love me,' I said. 'He told me he would never marry.'

'Love and marriage are not necessarily synonymous. . . . Besides, you must not take literally words spoken in anger or under duress.'

'I'm sorry now, I answered him back. . . . It hurt him. And it did me no good.'

'It's often best to hold one's peace.'

'But it wouldn't do to have him think I'm weak. He may think so as it is, for I tried to make amends.'

'To be gentle and forbearing is not weakness.'

'I don't want to be a door-mat.'

'A door-mat?' He laughed. 'What an idea! I don't think you one, anyway!'

I watched him as he sat there, his elbows on the desk and the tips of his fingers resting one against another. The fingers were thin and bluish about the nails. He wore mittens.

'I've seen something of life,' he said, 'in forty years doctoring—and a thing or two in my own family as well. . . . You can make up your mind to this—you can't hope to change the person you love. You can't change Simon, Anna. You can be done with him—'

'But I don't want to be done with him,' I broke in.

'You can be done with him, I repeat. Or you can accept him as the person he is, and, if it's worth your while, learn to handle him. Whether it's worth while rests with you. . . . But I warn you, don't attempt to change him unless you want quarrels and resentment. Take my brother, Edward. He's a professor, as you know. He married Agnes when she was nineteen. For the first couple of years everything was wonderful. Then the troubles began. She said she had married too young, that she was lonely and bored at Cambridge, and made to feel intellectually inferior to Edward. She had wanted to train for something, but her parents wouldn't consent—you know how it was

in those days. She worked up a grudge against him, blaming him for all kinds of things. My brother became, as you say, disillusioned. At first he argued with her, tried to point out that she was unfair—tried, in fact, to turn her into the person that he had imagined and wanted her to be. Edward, like most of us, was a bit of a dreamer, a romantic. But he was more shrewd than you might suppose.'

'How do you mean?'

'He saw the absurdity of trying to change his wife. Instead, he accepted her as she was. He began to realize that the things she said were not directed against him—that they were the result of her warped view of life, what I would call her neurosis. He trained himself to be gentle with her—it wasn't weakness, as some people supposed. When that failed and a storm burst, he put up his umbrella and waited for it to be over! Or, being Edward, he shut himself into his study and got on with his *magnum opus* on edible fungi!'

'And was he happy?'

'I think he was. He had great serenity, my brother. The point is that he learnt not to be hurt. Or perhaps I should say he was less and less hurt, for after all we are creatures of flesh and blood. . . . Besides, Anna, we can't make another human being responsible for our happiness. It's asking too much; putting an intolerable burden. We've got to make our own happiness.'

As I was going, I turned round. 'All that miserable

day in London,' I said, 'I didn't love Simon any the less, yet there were moments when I wondered if I liked him any longer. . . . It's most confusing.'

'No, I don't think so. . . . My brother loved Agnes, but that didn't mean he always liked what she said to him. And, no doubt, she felt the same about him. Ted could be very irritating. Aren't you confusing the person with the person's behaviour at a given moment of time? It's the same idea, I think, as God loving the sinner, but not his sins.'

The doctor had a way in his conversation of moving from things earthly to things celestial, as though he were at home in either world. It was something far removed from the righteous platitudes let fall by the archdeacon's widow, or the exchange of pious formalities among the nuns that had embarrassed me as a child at school.

'Of course,' he went on thoughtfully, 'it may be that you have fallen in love with a dream. As I have said, some of us are like that.'

I wondered if he had ever fallen in love with a dream. He was a man, I felt, to whom anything might have happened. But he was reticent about himself. I knew little of his past—except that he had been a widower many years and had lost a son in a climbing accident.

'Anyhow,' he ended, 'when you next meet your seafarer, try to see him as he is. . . . Be tolerant and don't look for perfection.'

'It may be that you have fallen in love with a

dream.' . . . The words echoed in my mind. The Simon whom I had known before the fracas in London had been, at least to some extent, a projection : someone I had wanted to exist. I had still to find the real Simon.

★ ★ ★

In the second week in March a letter came. It had been posted at Immingham Dock. It gave me his change of address, and it was the shortest he had yet written. I sent him a note in reply, and in it a little print of a crimson Redouté rose.

Ten days later, I, too, received a picture. It was an engraving, painted in delicate faded colours, of a four-masted sailing barque.

XI

IN JUNE my friend, Kathleen, lent me her flat in York Place for a week-end.

The morning after I arrived, my heart gave a bound when I saw, among the mail that had come for her, a letter to myself in Simon's handwriting. It had a London postmark, and had been forwarded from the west the evening before. The address at the top of the page was Montague Square.

I got here last evening after travelling down from Hull. The ship is in dock, owing to engine trouble. Impossible, as usual, for me to plan anything ahead.

I hope you keep well. . . .

I wrote in reply:

Thank you for your letter.

I am staying here for the week-end, at a flat belonging to my friend, Kathleen.

If you are free, I shall be very pleased if you will come and have tea this afternoon.

I walked along the Marylebone Road, then turned left down into Montague Square. The house was on

the west side of the Square a few doors from one on which there is a plaque with the words :

Anthony Trollope
Novelist
Lived Here

I was tempted to rap the brass knocker that hung on the shabby, black door. Instead, I put the note through the letter-box. I heard it drop to the floor.

★ ★ ★

The bell rang at York Place just after half-past three. He was standing on the step with a bunch of clove carnations in his hand.

‘Perhaps I’m a bit early?’ he said.

We had tea by the open window. A warm breeze was blowing. Between the chimneys we saw great steely-grey barrage balloons floating above the tree-tops. We ate lettuce and egg sandwiches, and a cake I had iced with soya bean flour and decorated with silver balls.

‘I hope,’ he said, ‘that you’ll have dinner with me this evening.’

He took me to a restaurant in the King’s Road. There were candles, and a little orange tree growing in an unpainted wooden tub. I was wearing a gingham dress with a check pattern in black and white and crimson. I saw Simon looking at it. Then he looked at a bow of ribbon in the same colouring on

my white hat. He smiled. 'You're very smart,' he said.

We drank wine in slim, green-stemmed glasses. It went sparkling down my throat.

'I'm still a bachelor, Anna,' he said to me.

'Yes, Simon,' I answered.

And our eyes met in the candlelight.

★ ★ ★

The next morning I went to Farm Street for the twelve o'clock Mass. I knew that Simon was sometimes there at that hour, but, when we parted the night before, we had made no plans to meet.

I went into the church from the Mount Street end, by the entrance that is on a line with the high altar.

As I pushed open the leather, nail-studded door, I was met by a rush of cool air touched with the smell of incense and candle wax. Then, I saw him. He was immediately in front of me, kneeling in a pew in the side aisle, a few rows from the front. He was reading his missal.

I went very quietly and knelt at his side. He turned his head and looked at me. A smile lit his face.

'You won't sit on my cap, will you?' he said.

I moved it carefully to one side, thinking how fine it looked with its spotless white cover and the bay leaves on the peak.

'Well,' he murmured. 'I am surprised! You didn't tell me yesterday that you were going to be free?'

'I didn't know if you'd be.'

'I thought you were going out with your "soldier boy", as you said nothing.' His lips smiled, but his eyes searched mine.

'Soldier boy?' I whispered in amazement.

'Hush!'

· * * *

We walked out of the church into dazzling sunshine.

'Shall we sit for a while?' he said. 'Then we can have lunch. I know a place in Shepherd Market.'

It was pleasant in the little garden, in the shadow of the plane trees' drooping branches. A couple of grape-coloured pigeons were pecking on the grass. Their feet were rose-pink, and, as they moved, there was a glint of emerald on their necks.

'Did you like the sermon?' he asked.

'Yes,' I said. The text had been 'And after a little suffering, you will find joy.' I was wondering whether, like myself, he had found in the words a symbol of the happiness that had come back to us.

'What did you mean, Simon, about the "soldier boy"?' I asked him presently.

'What I said.' Then, seeing my puzzled face, he went on: 'You mentioned something in one of your letters . . . about an officer you took round the cathedral.'

It was Martin. I had told Simon, at the time, about his visit.

'What a memory you have,' I said.

'Yes. My memory is good.'

· * * *

I was surprised when he asked me to go back with him to Montague Square. We could have tea there, he explained. Sunday tea was the only meal, except breakfast, that Mrs Oddie provided.

His room was on the ground floor. The trees in the square filled it with a cool green light. It had an Adams fireplace decorated with acanthus leaves. Mrs Oddie's plush and mahogany furniture looked strangely out of place. But it was Simon's belongings that held my attention. The round leather collar-box . . . The silver-backed hairbrushes . . . The row of pipes . . . A painting of Christmas roses . . . A photograph of an oil tanker at Bremen . . . The Spanish madonna in a hyacinth blue cloak over a robe the colour of wild roses. As well as volumes on navigation and mathematics, several books on cricket, some Conrad novels and a copy of Dana's *Four Years Before The Mast*, there was a New Testament in Latin, a Latin Dictionary, novels in French, the Collected Poems of T. S. Eliot and a scroll of Bach's Mass in B Minor.

Mrs Oddie brought in tea on a tray. She was wearing an olive-green stockinette dress with an enamel butterfly brooch at the neck. Her sallow face had a disillusioned look.

'An old family friend,' Simon said to her as he introduced me.

Mrs Oddie shook hands: 'I'm glad to make your acquaintance. The commander has mentioned you.' I looked at his face. He had laughed about Mrs

Oddie's use of the word 'Commander'. It was as if she derived from it some reflected glory. 'I told her,' he had said, 'that it was my R.N.R. rank, and that I'd sooner she addressed me as "Master Mariner"!'

'You pour out,' he said, when we were alone.

There was some thin bread and butter, two rock cakes, and gooseberry jam in a glass pot with a chromium top. The cups were patterned with blue daisies tied with gold ribbons. A paper napkin was folded across each cup.

After tea he stood up, and taking a bunch of keys from his pocket he unlocked a suitcase, took out a little crimson leather box, and opened it. There was a glitter of gold and brightly coloured stones.

'These belonged to my sister,' he said, showing me a bracelet and a cross on a chain. Then he took out two rings. One was set with rubies, the other was plain gold. He handed me the plain ring.

'My mother's wedding ring,' he said. 'You'll find her name on it.'

I took the ring and looked at it. I could feel his eyes watching me. On its inner side I read Anna R—. My own name, if I had been his wife.

'My mother was called Anna,' I heard him say, 'after a Polish princess who was a close friend of my grandmother.'

I held the ring in the palm of my hand. I was strangely moved. No words would come. As I gave it back, I felt the touch of his fingers on my own.

★ ★ ★

We were in the hall ready to go, when Mrs Oddie opened her sitting-room door and asked us in.

We sat on an apricot-coloured ottoman, talking about crossword puzzles and the difficulty of eking out the sugar ration. 'I tell the commander how lucky he is. Men aren't bothered with these problems.'

The walls were papered in a heavy green and hung with sepia reproductions in ornate gilt frames. One showed a lion preparing to spring. In another, a girl wearing a long white garment, stood with hands bound and eyes looking up to heaven. It was called *The Martyr*. There were quantities of ferns in brass pots.

As we sat talking, I was conscious of something that existed between Simon and myself. I could put no name to it. We were not husband and wife. Not lovers. Yet we were more than friends. It was something known only to our own most secret hearts. Mrs Oddie had no share in it, yet her presence threw it into relief.

Then Simon went out of the room. Mrs Oddie was addressing her remarks entirely to me.

'You've known the commander a long time, I suppose? A friend of the family?'

I answered her questions adequately but with caution. I felt her probing, purposefully, like a curlew in a rock pool. Then the questions ceased. Instead, it became 'The commander this . . .', 'The commander that . . .' As she said to 'the commander'.

I wished that he would come back.

Later, when we went out into the Square, he put his arm through mine.

‘That’s no way to live. Is it, Anna?’ he said.

★ ★ ★

The next morning I had to catch an early train from Paddington. When I went on to the platform, Simon was standing there.

‘I thought I’d come along,’ he said, seeing my face light up with surprise. He was carrying a punnet full of cherries. He handed it to me through the window as the train began to move.

‘I’ll be visiting Somerset when I can,’ he said.

★ ★ ★

A few days later a packet came by registered post. My fingers trembled, for my thoughts rushed back wildly to the ring. . . . Inside, was a silver and blue powder case that we had admired in a window in Shepherd Market. On the card enclosed with it I read: ‘With love from Simon.’

XII

DURING his leave, the following April, Simon came to the Swan Hotel at Wells.

His thoughts were on the future. Peace was in sight, it seemed; and, when it should come, it was in his mind to retire. He had had his fill of seafaring, he said. Perhaps he would farm in Somerset or Wiltshire. It was in his blood. Would I like to live on a farm, he asked.

He bought local papers and studied the advertisement columns. Or he stood in front of hoardings, reading the announcements of property for sale—making notes on the back of an envelope, about the position, the acreage, the stock.

One day he asked me to go with him to look at a farm. We rode on borrowed bicycles along the flat criss-crossing roads that are characteristic of the Sedgemoor marshlands. Past cone-shaped turf stacks; along the banks of a crystal stream overhung by grey-leaved willows. Blue-glinting swallows skimmed the water. And now and again we glimpsed a yellowy-green warbler, or a bullfinch's white-flashing rump and rose-red breast. The air was sweet with the notes of birds.

The farm was a low pink-washed building with

stabling and outhouses. There was a cottage adjoining it.

'I can live in the farm and you in the cottage,' he said laughing. 'How would you like that?'

'I'd sooner live in the farm,' I told him.

Later in the day he said, 'If we both lived in the farm, we could let the cottage for a good rent.' He was in high spirits. . . .

Next morning, however, the farm had become an impossible dream. It was too large, too remote. Who wanted to live on a farm, anyway? Nothing about it was right. •

We looked, too, at some property on the Mendips. There was a neglected, desolate house, enclosed by a broken-down wall. He turned away in disgust without so much as knocking on the door.

After that he still read advertisements. He even went on a few expeditions by himself. But what he saw always fell short of his expectations.

'Advertisements are a delusion,' he said.

He dreamed his dreams. But, confronted with reality, he shied like a nervous thoroughbred.

★ ★ ★

In Simon's eyes I was two persons, it seemed.

I was a child who counted the rows of braid on his sleeve and the medal ribbons on his breast, or asked him about life on board ship or the hardships of war, while he, in turn, answered me patiently and in detail, explaining the ranks of officers at sea, or for what

each medal was awarded. Or he drew diagrams to show the structure of a vessel, labelling the different parts in his neat handwriting; or, taking a map, traced his voyages and the ports of call.

He talked about his *Conway* days. He had swung his hammock in the same spot as John Masefield, a 'Conway boy' of an earlier generation. Again like Masefield, he had joined the ship in October instead of early in September, which was the more usual time. Opposition at home to his choice of a career had delayed him. Yet, despite this, he came out first in the Christmas examinations. The following year he was again top of the list, with promotion to the First Class, as well as a 'rate' as second Petty Officer in the Port Forecastle. The next year he was first Petty Officer in Port Mizzen, and, after the summer examinations in which he once more won distinction, first Petty Officer in charge of the Captain's gig. The Petty Officers, he said, used short knotted ropes called 'Teazers' to punish lazy hands on the Forecastle; and the Master-at-Arms raced round with a cane when he wanted to clear the decks. Some of the things he told me were true of his own day, others went back to an earlier time. They made the ship come alive. Forecastle . . . Mizzen . . . Hard Tack . . . Soddock . . . Skilly . . . New Chum. These terms, and more besides, became familiar to me.

I listened to him, like a child to an elder brother. Great concentration was expected. There must be no wandering thoughts, no interruptions, unless to ask

some pertinent question or to express suitable admiration. All wondering, I sat at the feet of the all-wise.

There were other times, however—and they became more frequent—when he turned to me for reassurance and sympathy. He would tell me that he was not feeling fit, or that he was irritated by the vagaries of Mrs Oddie. He discussed the cost of living or the loneliness of life on board ship, or how to handle a contrary colleague.

‘You’re a good listener, Anna,’ he said. He had not talked freely to many people. Occasionally, perhaps, to old Mrs Fielden.

There had been a barrier between his mother and himself. He had wanted—pathetically wanted—a close relationship with her. He had reached out for it. But, when the moment came—fearing himself swamped and his liberty impinged upon—he had shrunk back into his isolation.

There was the time on board the *Conway* when something went wrong with the finances, while he was temporarily in charge of the canteen.

He had a good idea what had happened: he knew that his assistant had borrowed from the cash. He warned him, and the fellow had sworn he had paid it back. Then, the Captain sent for Simon and questioned him closely. He stood with his hands by his sides answering, ‘Yes, sir.’ ‘No, sir.’ ‘I don’t know, sir.’ Not a word that might incriminate his companion.

'After all, it's my show. I must accept responsibility,' he told himself.

Finally, with a gesture of impatience, the Captain said: 'It's plain to see you're either a fool or a knave. . . . And I know from experience you're no knave!'

Simon turned on his heel. His honesty was not in question. But it rankled with him that he should be thought a fool. He felt a longing to talk the matter out. He thought of telling his mother, for he was due to go on leave. All the way down in the train to Somerset, he planned how he would tell her—he would feel the better for getting it off his chest. But when he was home and heard her say, 'Well, Simon, tell me all about the *Conway*,'—something closed down inside him. He said not a word of what was in his mind.

'She seemed to demand it, as a right,' he explained haltingly. 'Besides, she, too, might have thought me a fool. I don't think she had any idea of what life was like on board. She never came to see me all the time I was in the training ship. Natural enough in a way—very few women are interested in ships. . . . Yet other fellows used to have their mothers to visit them.'

'Of course she never wanted me to go to sea any more than my uncle,' he went on, 'and, after my sister died, she would have liked me to find a job ashore so that I could live with her. . . . Yes, she resented my choice of a career. . . . I remember, too, when my leave was coming to an end she was always unwell. . . . I never knew what was the matter—only

that she was in bed when the time came for me to say good-bye. It was always the same. It worried me.'

A picture imprinted itself on my mind with startling vividness. It was to recur again and again, arousing in me at once pity and fear. The mother ^{cr}aving, pathetically, to hold her son by wielding her sovereignty through illness. . . .

'Then, another thing came between my mother and myself. She had strong evangelical views. Well, when I was a cadet on the *Conway*, I became friendly with the vicar of a church in Liverpool that was looked upon as being high. Several of us used to go from the ship. They had Sung Eucharist and incense. I liked the church—I felt more at home there than anywhere else I can remember. My mother did not approve, and later when, as you know, I entered the Roman Catholic Church she was yet more distressed. . . . Mind you, she never said one word to me—the subject was too distasteful to her. But I knew what she thought from things she said to friends and relatives.'

'It was courageous of you, becoming a Catholic,' I said. Like Abraham, I thought to myself, going forth out of his own country.

'My father was a convert, too,' I told him. 'One of the "freaks" he took, Aunt Kate used to say—so I was brought up a Catholic. But most of the people round us in Pembrokeshire were Protestants. "Strangers in a strange land" my father called us. We went to Mass in a stone church, dedicated to St None, high above

the sea. . . . In mild weather, the door stood open. We would hear the waves breaking on the rocks below, and the gulls crying.'

* * *

One evening I took Simon to visit Doctor Laine. It was the first time they had met.

The three of us sat in his study, drinking Benedictine. It was a high-ceilinged Queen Anne room, with a bow window facing the street and, at the back, a french window that opened on to the garden. Books lined the walls and lay on the floor in piles. There was a model of a sailing ship on the mantelshelf. I was sitting apart from the others, by the french window. A blackbird was singing, and pheasant-eye narcissi under a weeping ash looked like stars in the green dusk.

Presently I went out of the room to talk to Mrs Mulholland, the housekeeper, about a skirt I was making. There was nothing she did not know about dressmaking, though she had no use for paper patterns unless it was 'an honest-to-goodness Butterick.'

When I came back, the two men looked up. The doctor smiled. Then they began their talk again. Their voices rose and fell—the doctor's mellow and flowing; Simon's low and pleasing in tone but at times hesitant, as though he were feeling his way. I put in a remark only now and again, if the doctor drew me into the conversation. 'Merseyside . . . Greenwich, . . . the Persian Gulf . . . San Francisco . . .

Chatham . . . George's Dock.' They were well away. I was glad of it. Glad to have brought them together : the doctor who was my friend, and Simon whom I loved. Now they had met, there could be no misunderstanding on Simon's part : no imaginary grounds for jealousy.

The blackbird stopped singing.

Dusk had given place to darkness. And still the two men talked. I could see in the shadows the doctor's silver hair ; and the white line of Simon's collar, and the stripe upon his sleeve.



Later, when we were at the gate of Chantry House, Simon said to me, 'I like Doctor Laine very much.'

'So do I,' I said.

'Yes, you're greatly taken up with him, I must say.'

'What can you mean?' My voice was impatient. It was absurd, I had hardly spoken that evening.

'Good-night,' he said. 'I'm too tired to argue.'

XIII

SIMON suggested spending the last days of his leave at Burnham-on-Sea.

He asked whether I and Aunt Kate would come. He wanted, I think, to show me the places of his childhood. At first my aunt said that she would go. She was flattered by the invitation; and I, too, was glad that she had been asked, though I wondered how she would occupy herself. However, at the last minute, she changed her mind. There was a crisis at the w.v.s. centre where she was helping. 'You'll be as well without me,' she said in her easy-going way. 'Times have changed.'



The days at Burnham passed quickly.

We sat near the river mouth, under the shelter of the sea wall. Little coloured boats bobbed up and down to the swell of the tide, or lay drawn up on wrinkled mudflats that, in the evening light, were transformed to a weird molten silver. Or we walked on the shore, past the old timbered lighthouse that stood, like the horse of Troy, white against a distance of sea and sky. I went barefoot, delighting in the feel of the cold, firm sand. From time to time I would stop

to pick up a shell or a pebble or a strip of sea-weed, or to look at an oyster catcher probing with its stout red bill. Simon waited for me—my shoes in his hand, watching me, or else preoccupied in a world of his own. . . . Sometimes a tangle of barbed wire blocked our path. To avoid it, we would scramble on to the sand-dunes where the wind swished through tufts of marram grass and skylarks sang.

Out in the channel we saw the cliffs of Steepholm and the candle-shaped lighthouse on Flatholm, and Brean Down resting, like a gigantic porpoise, on the shining surface of the sea. Or we glimpsed Newport or Cardiff, and Simon would tell me of the times he had put in at these ports and on what voyages. Or he pointed to the West and said, 'Those are the Quantocks. . . . Around that bend is Blue Anchor where my grandfather lived. After his death, and then my sister's, my mother was left on her own. So I bought her a house—out of money that came to me from my father—here in the town. I thought she'd be less lonely. You can see the gabled roof, there, behind the church.'

'It was good of you,' I broke in, 'thinking of all that—how your mother would be lonely.'

'Oh, I don't know,' he answered. 'It didn't help much. She wasn't happy. She said it was pointless keeping a home for someone who was hardly ever there. It's true my voyages took me far afield.'

'But I expect your mother understood.'

'Maybe, but she got tired of living here—I'm not

blaming her—and, one time when I was home, she said to me: “Simon, I can’t go on like this. I’d be better off in an hotel. You can put the house for sale. I don’t want to stay here”.’

‘I went to the agents, there and then, and soon we had an offer. Then my mother said: “I don’t know that I want to leave after all.”’

“‘It’s done now,” I told her. “I can’t keep changing. The agents will think I haven’t a mind of my own . . .” Women are changeable—don’t you agree?’

‘Not necessarily,’ I said. I felt that I must defend my sex. Besides, it seemed harsh of him not to let his mother change her mind. . . . Again I felt pity for the mother. The suggestion to sell the house, because she was lonely, might well have been—like the illnesses at the end of his leaves—an unconscious ruse to keep him at her side. If so, was she not the more pitiable, in that the very device to hold her son had taken him the further from her?

‘So I’ve not had much home life,’ he went on. ‘My mother wandered from one spa to another up to the time she died, and I joined her when I had a spell ashore. . . . I was sorry the house went.’

* * *

We stood in the walled-in graveyard, high up above the mudflats and the sea, staring at the words on the granite headstone:

CELIA, ONLY DAUGHTER OF . . .

Gusts of rain spattered our cheeks, and the cypress trees waved angrily, like the tails of giant Persian cats. Simon stood bareheaded with his forehead slightly wrinkled, and the wind tossing his hair. I tried to imagine his thoughts. I hoped that, by being there, I might somehow be a comfort to him. That was what I was there for. . . . And something told me I would always be there . . . standing at his side.

As we walked down the hill, he began to talk. 'I was at Merseyside when my sister died. Just back from a Pacific voyage. My leave was ahead of me. Life was good. . . . Then the telegram came, and the journey home in Sunday trains that stopped at station after station. . . . I could do nothing with my mother. She said "I never wanted to send the child to a boarding school. You were always telling me to let her go." She sat for days behind drawn blinds saying "I have nothing to live for now".'

'A high wind blew, I remember, as we stood by the grave. The wreaths were tossed to nothing. . . . All except some artificial flowers under a glass globe, sent by a great-aunt at Clevedon. . . .'

'I've nothing to live for.' Terrible, terrible words spoken by a mother to a son. The pity that I had felt for the mother was lost in a new and larger compassion. It was for Simon my heart bled.

★ ★ ★

I knew him better, yet his disposition puzzled me. I understood sudden flashes of temper. My father and

my aunt used to go 'hammer and tongs' sometimes. But, afterwards, there were reconciliations and expressions of regret. Simon found it hard to express regret. He felt, I think, that it demeaned him in the eyes of a woman. Occasionally, he seemed to go out of his way to put me in the wrong. . . . And yet, at other times, he was gentle and considerate.

We were sitting in the hotel lounge at Burnham.

'I've one or two things to show you,' he said. He took some papers from his pocket and handed them to me.

They were reports of his school days at Clifton, and then on board the *Conway*. I read them and gave them back to him with words of praise. Then he showed me a photograph of his mother. She wore evening dress of the Edwardian period. The fine, deep-set eyes resembled his own, but the mouth drooped, as though joy had passed her by. Finally, he brought out a snapshot of himself. 'Taken the day I left on my first voyage,' he said. There was pride in his voice. I saw a very young man in officer's uniform, standing with his hands resting on the ship's wheel. He wore gauntlet gloves and his whole face was smiling.

'I like this,' I said. 'May I keep it?'

'No, you may not,' he answered. For a moment I thought he spoke in fun. But the voice was harsh.

'Why should you?' he went on.

'For no reason. . . . I liked it, that's all.'

'No,' he said, again, putting the photograph into

his pocket. 'Women are all the same. They can't see anything without wanting to possess it.'

'You shouldn't say that . . .' I began. I was blazing with anger. Then something stopped me. No, better to 'put up my umbrella and wait'. And as I waited my anger cooled, and an inkling of what was in his mind came to me. Without knowing it, he had become again the *Conway* boy, shrinking from his mother because his liberty was impinged upon: the Simon who feared a woman's domination, but could not believe in her love.

When we were having tea, he took out the snapshot again; surreptitiously, as if he wanted to keep it hidden behind his tobacco pouch. Presently he handed it to me across the table.

'You can have this, Anna,' he said, 'if you still want it.'

★ ★ ★

The next evening (it was our last at Burnham) I was going out before dinner to post a letter. On the way downstairs I passed Simon's room. The door was open. He must have seen me, for he called softly, 'Anna, come here a moment.' He had some pictures of sailing ships, he said, that he had not shown me.

We stood by the window, looking at photographs and engravings of tall, winged ships, stately and lovely as birds. The *Wanderer* . . . the *Skirmisher* . . . the *Hispaniola* . . . the *Peking* . . . the *Pusat* . . . the *Pamir*. His face was close to mine. I could see each line on his cheek and about his mouth.

'Anna dear, tell me, what are you looking at?' he asked me.

'The lines on your face, Simon.' And I touched his cheek with my hand. 'I love you very much,' I said.

'And I love you, Anna.' And his lips touched mine.

As I turned away, I saw his poplin shirts in an open drawer, and, then, his pipe on the dressing-table beside the silver-backed hair-brushes. I picked up the pipe and held it, liking to feel in my hands the slender stem and the smooth roundness of the bowl. As I held it I remembered the smell of tobacco that had clung to his letters. And in the moment of seeing the shirts and holding the pipe in my hands, I knew that I loved him not as a romantic, dream figure, but as a man of flesh and blood, with light and shade, good and bad, whose life, for better or for worse, was bound to my own.

* * *

That night we stood at the end of the breakwater. The soft, blue darkness was full of the smell of the sea.

'When did you love me first, Simon?' I asked.

'That's a hard question.'

'But when?'

He was silent. Then he said, 'I loved you that evening in the train, between Westbury and Frome, when you sat in front of me with your case resting on your knees.'

'Oh, Simon. What did you find to love in me?'

'The candour in your eyes looking up into mine . . .

thought, "She must have faith in me, to come bringing her night things".'

'Was that the first time you loved me?'

Again he was silent.

'I think, perhaps, I loved you that day at Wells, at the lunch table, when you said you'd enjoyed the walk and your eyes shone. . . . And you, Anna, when did you love me?'

'Oh, I loved you before that. I loved you from the beginning—when your first letter came . . . and I carried it about with me and read it and read it till it was creased and soiled and coming in pieces.'

'Simon,' I said as we walked back, my hand in his. 'Don't let anything take your love away.'

'Nothing will take it away. I promise you, Anna.'

XIV

IT WAS the first week in December. The war had ended, and I was again in London. I had spent the morning attending to some business for Aunt Kate. Now Simon was coming.

I was looking out of the window of the hotel. The grey evening was full of the white, swooping wings of gulls. Scarlet buses passed up and down the Bayswater Road. Trees in the park loomed black out of the mist. Then I saw him on the pavement. He wore a dark coat and a white scarf; and a soft black hat. I thought that he looked very fine. I was glad to find myself thinking so. I had asked myself, sometimes, whether his uniform gave him a glamorous unreality.

We had tea, then walked in Kensington Gardens. I was wearing a little fur cap and the fur collar on my coat came up close under my chin: I was warm and happy. It was as if there were nobody in the park but ourselves. No sound but our voices and the drip of moisture from the trees, and the distant hum of traffic. Swans on the Serpentine slid in and out of the mist. It was a low-lying mist that clung about the tree-trunks. Above it a wan moon looked down on us. Simon was telling me about albatrosses in the Pacific, and ships that took their names from birds.

Cormorant . . . Kittiwake . . . Heron . . . Magpie . . . Wild Swan.

We sat for a while in a shelter built like a classical portico. Below us was the sunk garden. The stone vases and balustrades were pale in the moonlit darkness. We thought of Christmas presents for each other. He asked me if I would like fur gloves to match the cap and the collar. Or, perhaps, a blouse? I suggested giving him a pipe.

We talked, too, about being together at Christmas. But, then, he did not know whether he would be ashore. The company, in which he had served before the war, had asked him to take a tanker to Curaçoa and Aruba. It might be any time now. He was sorry, in one way. It meant postponing plans for the future. He was thinking, still, he said, of giving up the sea. But it was his profession, his livelihood. Farming was all very well, but it was a risky business. And now this had come. Better to get this voyage over, then plan the future.

We talked again of Christmas. 'It's a time,' he said, 'to be in a home of one's own.'

'Yes,' I said, 'a home of one's own.'

'And I hope one day, Anna, you and I shall spend it in our own home.'

'Oh, Simon, I hope so.' Yet my heart was heavy because, again, he was going away, and the future was still unplanned. 'You talk so, my beloved,' I thought. 'But there is always something more to be done; always another sea to cross.' . . . And yet, all

must surely be well. Had he not told me, that night, at Burnham, that nothing would take his love away? 'I promise you, Anna,' he had said.

★ ★ ★

The next day was Sunday. I was going back in the afternoon. We were to meet at Farm Street Church in time for Mass. He had said that he would keep me a place in the side aisle, in the fourth pew from the front.

When I arrived there was no sign of him and the pew was full. I found a seat, further back. Now and again I turned my head, hoping to see him. Mass had begun, and still he was not there.

'*Credo in unum Deum patrem omnipotentem.*' They were saying the Creed, now. They. For I could think only of Simon. Was he not well? Had he met with an accident? Had I made a muddle—come to the wrong place, or at the wrong time? I looked round, only to meet the disapproving stare of a woman behind. Oh, God, why had he not come?

I waited when the congregation went out. I felt desperate, not knowing whether to stay where I was or go back to the hotel. Then he appeared, as if from nowhere. Mrs Oddie had delayed him just as he was going out of the front door, he explained—'Such a talker, that woman.' So, arriving late, he slipped into a side chapel. He had seen me looking about during the service.

'There was no need to turn round,' he said. 'It looked peculiar. Besides, you knew I'd come.'

When we went outside, it was deluging. Simon had not brought a raincoat.

'I should have stayed indoors today,' he said. 'I've got a cold.'

'You must go to bed early, then,' I told him, 'and make yourself a hot drink.'

'Must? Who says must?' It was the boy who would not let his mother tell him what to do.

'Well, not "must" . . . But it would be wise.'

'I'll see.' The aggressive tone was gone. 'It's difficult at Montague Square. Mrs Oddie doesn't want to provide meals. Besides, she expects a man always to be a hundred per cent fit.'



It rained all the afternoon. There was nothing we could do except sit in the hotel. We were alone for a while, and he was beginning to relax. He took out his pipe, and smiled across at me. Then a woman came in and sat close to us. She had black eyes and violently pink cheeks, like a Dutch doll. She wore a dark green knitted dress: its narrow, ribbed skirt gave her figure an odd, bottle-like appearance. Simon put his pipe back in his pocket, picked up a newspaper and opened it. Conversation had become impossible. Anything we said would have been audible to a third person. As the afternoon crept by, the woman in the knitted dress was not just someone who made it difficult for us to talk. She had become a symbol of some malign thing that was for ever coming between us, keeping

us apart, just when it seemed that at last we were to be together.

Tea was brought to us on a tray. And the woman was brought hers. Then it was time to go. As always, Simon offered to carry my case. I refused. 'No, thank you,' I said. 'It's very light.' I wondered why I was peeved because he did not offer a second time. At Paddington I bought him Veganin tablets at a kiosk on the platform.

I thought about his cold as I sat in the railway carriage. What if he were to become ill at Montague Square? Who would look after him? Would he stay indoors? Would he call a doctor, if necessary? I remembered something my father once said. He was talking about a bachelor. 'Lives like a king, but he'll die like a dog.' I was becoming morbid. My imagination was, again, running away with me.

Three days later there was a letter.

The cold is gone, thanks to your thoughtfulness. I am sailing at the end of the week. I hope that you will like the Christmas present I have dared to choose for you. I saw it in Woolland's window and thought you would look nice in it.

A parcel came by the next post. In it there was a pale blue muslin blouse. The front was decorated with tiny horizontal tucks.

XV

IN AUGUST Simon wrote from Tilbury.

I shall be on board here for some weeks with much to attend to. It's not, I fear, a place which you would choose for a summer holiday. Still, if you'd like to see the river, I can find you somewhere to stay across at Gravesend. I would bring you down from London . . .

I travelled from Somerset with Aunt Kate, who was coming to spend a few days in London. She talked in the train of my visit to Tilbury. 'You'll be coming back with a ring on your finger, sure as a gun!' she said. Her preoccupation with my future bothered me.

We stayed the night at an hotel near Sloane Street. Simon joined us. He and I were to leave at eight in the morning. I asked at the reception desk to be called early. The telephone would ring in my room, I was told. However, there was a mistake. It did not ring, and I slept on.

I was wakened by a tap on the door. When I opened my eyes the sun was streaming in the window and Simon stood by my bed. The back of his hand stroked my cheek with an upward movement. I used to stroke Titus, the cat, in that way when I was a child.

‘Anna, dear, you must get up. . . . Breakfast is ready and the sun is shining for you.’ He took my hand in his, held it for a moment, and was gone. . . . I lay very still, thinking of the strength of the hand that had enclosed mine—and how the skin was rough in contrast with my own.

‘Simon, Simon,’ I said, ‘how deeply and tenderly I love you.’

Then I heard a clatter of hooves, as the Horse Guards passed in the street. Breakfast was waiting, I remembered.

★ ★ ★

The train from Fenchurch Street stopped again and again. Stepney . . . East Ham . . . Barking . . . Dagenham Dock. At Rainham there was a hold-up on the line. Simon stood on the platform talking to the guard, while I leant out of the window looking at the snug square-towered church among the apple trees and swallows darting in and out of a black, timbered barn. On the marshlands at Purfleet there were sheep grazing, and long-horned shaggy cattle, and, in the distance, brown-sailed barges that seemed to glide along the top of an embankment. Near Grays, jagged formations of chalky rock showed white among dark ilexes and the berries on the wayfaring trees were already a bright, polished red. Then, Tilbury came upon us, all in a rush. Cranes and funnels and masts crowded the sky.

We drank coffee in the station refreshment room, standing among a group of Lascar ship-hands. They

wore heelless slippers that made a flapping sound. Then we bought ferry tickets, walked down the covered way and went on board the *Edith*. A huge merchant ship passed, churning the water. She was guided by a blue-funnelled tug with the name *Crested Cook* painted on the bow. Across the river the roofs and spires of Gravesend rose out of the mist.



The hotel faced the river. It was a solid building in the Georgian style, with a pillared porch. According to tradition, King James the Second had lived there when, as Duke of York, he was Lord High Admiral and Warden of the Cinque Ports. In front there was a lawn with little elm trees and four white flag-poles at the water's edge.

It seemed dark inside. A grandfather clock ticked in the hall, and there was a pleasant, curving staircase.

I came back to this hotel some years later. It had been renovated and enlarged. Yet I had no difficulty in finding the room in which I slept during the ten days I write of. A door from the lounge on the first floor opened with disconcerting suddenness on to two steps that led down to a second door. It was a long room, overlooking the river. The light poured in the two sash windows, each with shutters and a low seat. Across at Tilbury I saw the pinkish-red buildings of the Port of London Authority surmounted by a green lead dome. To the west there was a blur of cranes and

ships. Sometimes a shaft of sunlight picked out dazzling white decks and crimson or primrose funnels. Below Tilbury, the view changed to a distance of pastures and cornfields and trees misty against the sky.

Ships were all about me. Their lights glowed in the lavender dawn, and siren answered siren with mournful echo. Through the night I heard the chug of engines and the ringing of bells. When a large vessel passed, the water, displaced by its passage, slapped against the beach, and shafts of red and yellow and emerald light swept the darkness of the room.

I was admitted into Simon's life. I saw the docks. I went on board his ship. He showed me the oil tanks . . . the engine-room . . . the galley . . . the chart room . . . the wheelhouse . . . the bridge.

When he was able, he crossed the river to lunch with me in the hotel. More often, he was not ashore till evening. Yet the time slipped by. It was pleasant to wander through the narrow, brick-paved streets running parallel to the river or cutting down at right angles to the water's edge. I used to go into the covered market which is presided over by an effigy of Queen Victoria with a startled expression on her face. Or I stared into shops that sold sea-boots and oilskins and all manner of sailors' gear; or into the pet shop where there were canaries and humming birds, and tortoises burrowing in wood shavings. Sometimes I gave lumps of sugar to a donkey tethered on a bombed site.

I would smile, as I passed, at the man with the round, shining face who sold cockles and prawns, whelks and crabs and eels.

'All the best to you, miss!' his booming voice rang out. 'All the best!'

Occasionally there was shopping to do for Simon. He would ask me to buy his tobacco or a tablet of soap or writing paper.*

Now and again I crossed to Tilbury, and made my way along the river for the joy of the salt-tanged air touched with the smell of tar and fish and oil and rope. I used to go as far as the fortress with the archway and classical pillars. It was here I met a little girl in the red tartan frock. I was sitting on a bench near the water, when she settled herself beside me.

'Where's your home, madam?' she asked, as she smoothed her skirt over her grubby knees.

'I'm staying over at Gravesend,' I told her.

'Bloody 'ot there,' she answered seriously. Then she talked of Mum and Dad and her big sister, Gert.

I was able to pick out the different vessels, now. Passenger ships. Tankers. Ships laden with yellow timber. Pleasure steamers. Police launches. The scarlet fire launch. Dredgers. Lighters. Brown-sailed fishing craft. Yachts. Tugs. They crowded the water, dwarfing its vast expanse. Liners came from Australia, New Zealand, India. Merchant vessels brought cargoes from Göteborg and Helsinki, from Gdynia and Bremen, from Rotterdam and Le Havre.

★ ★ ★

At first, Simon used to cross to Gravesend to meet me at the end of the day. Then, we thought of a plan which gave us longer together. Instead, I went to Tilbury to be there when he came out of the docks. Sometimes he was already waiting on the landing-stage when I got off the ferry at seven o'clock. Sometimes it was a quarter to eight before he came.

'Don't hang about for me,' he said, 'in case I'm prevented from coming. You might catch cold.' But I always waited, and he always came. The time did not drag. In the evening light a shimmering radiance rested upon the river. And there were ships to watch, and a shelter should it rain.

I used to see him coming down the covered way with his quick, light step. Sometimes, if there was no one about, he would run forward and catch my hands into his own.

'Well, Anna, how has the day gone?' he would say. At other times he was moody and silent. Then I was silent, too, to keep him company.

Some evenings we crossed the river and ate cold meat in the hotel dining-room. He drank ale with his. I had cider. Or we went into a café in Gravesend—a simple place that served fried fish, and tea in thick cups. Or we took the bus to an inn at Dartford. There was a bar full of shining brass and voices and tobacco smoke; and a dining-room with damask cloths on the tables. Or, after sandwiches in the refreshment room at Tilbury, we strolled by the river, telling each other the happenings of the day—how things had been on

board; what I had done; what vessels I had seen; to whom I had talked. Or we stood in the twilight on the deep water jetty, watching some vessel sail upon the evening tide—swinging her lovely bows to seaward, then gliding from view ablaze with lights.

As dusk gave way to darkness, the huge flushed face of the moon rose behind the black shapes of cranes and chimneys; and then, turning to silver in her ascent, flung a glittering path upon the darkening waters—transforming the shapes and colours of the day in the spell of her unearthly radiance.

Tilbury Dock has a character all its own. This is accentuated in the moonlight. Little low, timbered houses are ghostly white. Black rectangular buildings jut against the sky. Ships rise from among trees. There is a bridge, over the railway, lit by a solitary lamp and with grim walls on either side. It divides into two, then backs awkwardly upon itself. It seems to come from nowhere, to go nowhere.

We were standing on this bridge. Simon was telling me how, once, during the war—it was just before he met me at Westbury—he had wired to Mrs Oddie that he was coming that night. When he reached Montague Square with his bags in hand, he found a scrap of paper tied to the door, with the words ‘Gone to the cinema . . .’ He wanted a home, he said.

‘You should set up house,’ I told him. It was meant to sound an impersonal, practical suggestion. It did

not ring true. Then I spoke from my heart. 'I can look after you . . . I can cook . . . Why do we waste our lives? . . . You said you loved me, Simon?'

'I do love you, Anna. It's not that . . . it's being married.'

'Have you never wanted to marry?' I asked him.

We walked on, in the direction of the docks.

'I don't think so,' he said. 'I put my work before everything . . . and I have scarcely known any women. When I was in my early twenties my mother began saying to me, "All nice young men want to have a wife." I suppose I'm stubborn, but this made me take the opposite line. It's true I was friendly with a cousin. We went for walks and played tennis, and we wrote to each other when I was at sea. There was no more to it than that . . . except that, when my mother kept saying, "It wouldn't do to marry a cousin," I told myself, "I'll marry my cousin or no one."'

'Then, one time, when I came home after a voyage, her engagement was announced—to a man on the Stock Exchange. She had said nothing of this to me.' The bitterness I knew was creeping into his voice. 'You can't tell what a woman will be up to. . . . I wish I had met you before, Anna.'

'But we've met now, Simon.'

'I had an uncle,' he went on, as though he had not heard, 'the clergyman. You remember? His wife said she adored him when they first married. Then she got bored living in a country parish. She took to going to

the Riviera. In the end she left him. He used to say to me: "Be on your guard against women."

We were standing again, by some alder trees. As he talked, I saw behind him the dock gates, black and formidable as the portals of Dis, and, above them, the docks and funnels of some vast ship, unearthly pale in the moonlight, towering skywards like the bastions of an enchanted castle. I felt very, very tired. Where did it lead, where end, all this talking? What problems . . . difficulties . . . doubts . . . all about nothing!

I wanted to get away, to be alone. 'You can't tell what a woman will be up to' . . . 'Be on your guard against women'. His distrust and his fear were bringing into being the very thing he feared. At that moment I wanted to leave him. It was, it is true, but an impulse born of exasperation and weariness and in no way true to the dictates of my heart.

'I'd better be going,' I said.

Still he went on talking. My feet were heavy, like stones.

'I'll be going now,' I said again.

'Very well,' he answered. And the black gates had closed upon him.

I turned and began to walk towards the ferry. My way took me past a patch of waste ground. Every detail was accentuated in the cold light of the moon—and by a heightening of perception that comes to the soul at times of deeply felt emotion, I saw red sorrel seeds, and purple thistle heads and a tiny golden insect hanging upon a bended blade of grass,

and convolvulus flowers waxen white above a mass of deep-shadowed green. I heard the sandy road scrape under my feet and the breeze rustling in the alder leaves. Then I remembered that we had not said good-night. Nor had he said, as on other nights, 'See you tomorrow' or 'Till tomorrow'. I looked back at the great black gates . . . and the enchanted castle rising above them.

It was not more than a few minutes to the ferry. But I wondered why he had not come with me. He had always done so before—and often crossed to the other side. Had I hurt him when I said, 'I'll be going now'? Had I made him feel unwanted? I saw someone lurching on the far side of the road. A drunk, perhaps. Maybe he would attack me. Then Simon would be sorry that he had let me go alone. But the figure passed without a glance.

I stood on the landing-stage, waiting for the ferry-boat. The inky water was lit with trails of yellow and red and emerald. A barge slipped by, its sails dusky against the blue darkness of the river. I heard voices on board and the lap of water against the bows. The loveliness of the night tore at me. I wanted to hold it. But, above all, it was something to be shared : and at this moment I was most bitterly alone.

On the *Catherine's* lower deck an oil lamp was burning, and warm air came through the door of the engine-room. I stood there a moment. The warmth and the lamplight were comforting. Then I thought, 'No, I shall see the night to its full.' I went up the steps.

The moonlit sky was above me; and, spread below, the river's shining, quivering beauty.

Three sailors came on to the deck and sat on a seat opposite. The covers of their caps were vividly white. They were laughing and their faces were very young. One of them looked across.

'On holiday?' he asked. Then he came over and sat by me. He seemed younger than ever. He had a snub nose and an uncomplicated expression. He took a photograph in a cellophane case out of his jerkin. It showed a girl with crimped hair and large, clearly defined lips.

'My fiancée,' he said. 'Ain't she smashing?'

Why could Simon not have been uncomplicated, like this sailor? Instead of which, he was one of those of whom Alfred Adler said that they found it easier to embrace the whole world than a single human being.

At Gravesend, as I came out of the covered way from the landing-stage, I saw the three sailors link arms and make off under the lamplight, singing rowdily.

★ ★ ★

I sat on my bed, too tired to undress. I thought of my aunt's words, 'You'll come back with a ring on your finger.'

My suitcase was on a chair in front of me. A label hung from it with my name and address at Wells. Why did I stay? I asked myself. Why? What was I

waiting for? We had made no plans for tomorrow. Nor for any tomorrow.

I went to the chest-of-drawers and took out my quilted handkerchief sachet, then a pink pot of Elizabeth Arden cream, then stockings, and blouses and petticoats. I opened my case and put them into it. I took out of the wardrobe a turquoise and white candy-striped dress, spread it out on the bed and folded it with exaggerated care, putting sheets of tissue paper in the skirt and shoulders. It was a dress Simon had admired. Suddenly I stopped. Why act a part? Why try to be someone I would never be? Let me rather persist in my folly, if folly it was, to the end. I threw the dress across the back of a chair. The tissue paper slid rustling to the floor.

I lay down on the bed, without undressing, and slept.

★ ★ ★

When I came into the hotel at five o'clock the following evening, Simon was in the hall. 'I managed to get ashore early,' he said.

He asked if I would like to go down the river in a launch. He had some matter, he said, to attend to. He did not say what it was, either then or later. Nor did he land or have conversation with anyone, except a passing word to the boatman.

Tilbury and Gravesend were left behind. The river widened. To the left I saw the cornfields and hedges of the Essex countryside: to the right, that strange, treeless desolation of the Medway coast,

where there is no sound but the clang of a buoy or the sea-birds crying. . . . On and on, over wimpled water shadowed with amethyst and pearl. Past a works with windows afire from the setting sun. Past a wave-washed wreck and great, silver tankers sleeping at anchor; and an oil refinery that blazoned the sky with pennants of flame.

We spoke little. And when we did, it was in gentle, subdued voices. The quiet of the evening had wrapped itself about us.

The moon was high when we landed at Gravesend.

'You were happy tonight, Anna?' Simon said.

'I was,' I answered.

That evening came back to me long afterwards, as the culmination of my stay by the river.

XVI

MONTHS had passed and spring had come again.

I was staring through the window of the Cornish express, watching the tree-tops sway against a sky heavy with clouds. My only thought was for the trees swaying against the sky.

'Oh God, let the wind drop,' I prayed. " "

The lush fields of Devon were left behind; and sea and shore glimpsed through red, tunnelled cliffs.

Still the train rushed on its way . . . between steep embankments on which rocks jutted through a tangle of ashes and elders, rhododendrons and bracken and broom . . . past derelict barns and lonely farmsteads . . . bridging brown streams that tumbled over the stones in creamy foam and gullies forested with twisted, leafless oak trees.

Now and again the ashen tips of china-clay burrows peeped above a shoulder of green. Or I saw, far down below the level of the train, the tawny, hovering wings of a kestrel; or waders feeding on the flats by the jade water of an inlet.

Let the wind drop! If the wind dropped, Simon would be on the platform to meet me. With such a gale as this it would be impossible for him to get ashore, in the dinghy, from where his ship was

moored in a creek of the river between Truro and Falmouth.

He was back from a voyage to Abadan; and was remaining with the ship until the company had decided what was to be done with her. She might be sold to a Dutch company—in which case he would take her to Amsterdam—or to an English company. Or she might be scrapped—she was an old vessel and had seen hard service in the war. Anyway, he would be on board for a matter of weeks, perhaps longer. There was no telling. At first there had been another officer, but he became restless and removed himself; Simon was not sorry—his companion had been a queer kind of chap and too fond of drink. He was on his own now, except for a cabin boy, and a watchman who was shared with a vessel moored lower down the river.

From time to time someone from the company visited him—discussed what might happen to the ship, authorized painting and repairs, then took himself off. On Fridays, a launch was sent from Falmouth by Foxes, the shipping agents, with mail, oil and various supplies, and, also, to take Simon ashore for a period of about four hours during which he shopped, had his hair cut and the like. He could go ashore other days, but, unless a launch was passing from another vessel, it meant rowing in the dinghy as far as King Harry's Ferry—a distance of up to half an hour in a moderate wind, and impossible if the wind was strong. From there, it was a good two and a half

miles walk to the main road on which the bus ran between Falmouth and Truro. And there was the journey back at night. . . .

One little grey town followed upon another. Liskeard . . . Bodmin Road . . . Lostwithiel . . . Parr . . . St Austell. Still the wind blew. And it was blowing in the late afternoon when the train came into Truro. Simon was not on the platform. I waited for a few minutes hoping that he might come, yet knowing that he could not. Then, picking up my suitcase, I asked the way to the hotel where he had taken me a room for a week.

* * *

I slept fitfully that night. At three o'clock I slipped a coat over my nightdress and stood looking out at the shreds of cloud that scudded across the stars. The window rattled, and, from under the door, a blast cold as steel cut my ankles. When I woke at seven, the wind still blew. Without lifting my head from the pillow I could see fir trees, on a distant hill-top, waving against the sky.

The day dragged by. I was reluctant to be out for long, in case there should be a message from Simon—though how there could be was inconceivable. I walked as far as Worth's Quay. There, too, the wind bent the trees, and the white warehouses were dappled with shadows flung back from the river. But the clouds had scattered and the sky was a brilliant blue.

At lunch in the hotel I overheard a man say that

there had not been such a wind for years ; and that no one would want to be on the water. I thought of Simon continually. I found myself beset with anxiety, for fear he had tried to cross in the dinghy the day before. I was beginning to hate the fir trees swaying against the sky. To forget them, I went through tattered copies of *Woman's Own* that lay on the table in the lounge. I read the questions put to Mary Grant by girls in love or disillusioned wives, then thought out an answer before reading what was written below.

* * *

When I woke the next morning, the wind had dropped. What now, I wondered. Simon had written that, if it were possible, he would meet the train the day of my arrival, but he had not said what would happen otherwise. He went to Falmouth on Friday mornings. I knew that. And today was Friday. No doubt he would telephone when he landed, but, even so, there would be an hour's journey between us, and he had to go back to the ship in the afternoon. Why not go into Falmouth by bus and be there to meet him?

As I dressed, the further idea came to me that perhaps the boatman would take me up the river in the launch that was fetching Simon. By half-past seven I had left the hotel.

* * *

Falmouth was hardly awake. Vegetables were being unloaded outside a greengrocer's. In a fishmonger's,

a youth wearing a striped apron swilled the marble front. A weather-beaten seaman touched his cap to me. I followed the narrow, twisting street. To the left, there were glimpses, down an alley or under an arch, of ships in the docks and brightly coloured boats on the blue water of the harbour. On the right I passed lanes and flights of steps leading up to terraced houses at the back of the town; and then, at a bend, the parish church with its square, narrow tower. Presently, I saw the Customs building. It had a coat of arms over it, and six classical pillars painted chocolate-brown. Simon had described it to me. Here, I turned down a slope that led to a jetty. I knew that the launch left from the Customs House Quay. Even so, I wondered if there might not be some difficulty.

Yet nothing could have been easier. A boat was moored at the bottom of a flight of steps. A man with a pipe in his mouth was sitting in it, reading a newspaper. He was a big, clumsy-looking fellow with a purplish face and a shade over one eye. He had a curly-haired dog with him.

I gathered my courage. 'Are you going up the river, by any chance, to the *Mirabelle*? I have a friend on board. . . . I wondered if you'd take me?'

He nodded, took his pipe from his mouth and spat. 'Right, miss,' he said. 'Get aboard.'

As I got into the boat, the dog thumped its tail and barked good-temperedly, then sat back on its haunches.

Soon Falmouth was fading from view. The tankers

in the docks had become a blur of funnels and masts. The sun shone on the dazzling brilliance of gorse, on cocoa-brown fields and blue-green water. The engine chugged. Waves slapped the bows. I tasted salt on my lips and my face was wet with spray. The river was narrowing. Gorse and open fields were left behind. Trees reached to the water's edge. We passed a slipway used by the Americans for D-Day, then two destroyers lying at anchor, then the grey and white houses grouped about the beach at King Harry's Ferry.

We turned into a creek. Ahead of us was a huge tanker, standing high out of the water—all black and white and rust-red. She looked incongruous there, among oak trees and fields and primrose-dappled banks. Her bows towered up, dwarfing the launch to nothingness. Suddenly, I felt afraid. It was the immensity of the ship and the pervading silence. Like a ship of the dead, I thought. Not a movement, not a sound. Suppose Simon were not there?

We drew alongside, and the boatman shouted something that was incomprehensible to me. I saw Simon come out on to the bridge. He looked down towards the launch, then disappeared. I could not tell whether he had seen me.

Then the boatman went on board by a ladder that was suspended from the ship and given a slope by means of an oil drum lashed to the end. He moved surprisingly nimbly, for he was a great barge of a man, and he was laden with a packing case and two

oil cans. After some minutes, I saw the two of them—Simon and the boatman—talking together on the lower deck. Presently, Simon came to the railing and, looking over, he called out casually, ‘Good morning to you,’ as though it were the most natural thing in the world that I should be sitting there in the boat.

He followed the boatman down the ladder. Then, he said to me, as he might have said to anyone: ‘It’s a lovely day, isn’t it?’ There was a wraith of a smile about his lips. For the rest, he was silent, except, now and again, when he drew my attention to a ruined church or a wreck, or a mansion standing among lawns and rhododendrons, and, when Falmouth was in sight, the lighthouse of Saint Anthony.

We had walked up the slope from the landing-stage, when Simon stopped on the pavement outside Foxes’ office. It was a pleasant brick building with bow windows. Through the open door, a passage was visible, and, at the end of it, another door into a flower-garden.

‘I hope you haven’t been in there?’ he said.

‘Indeed no. Why should I have been?’ There was defiance in my voice.

‘I just wondered how you knew about the launch?’

‘From your letters!’ I was laughing now. ‘But what if I had been in Foxes?’

‘They might have thought it odd, that’s all—a woman wanting to visit me in the launch. . . . I don’t mean that I thought it odd.’

‘Are you pleased I’ve come, Simon?’ I asked. They

were the words I had used to him that February when I had travelled in the snow to be with him in London.

'Very pleased indeed.' His words, too, were the same. . . . 'But I wouldn't have been pleased if you'd called at Foxes.'

We both laughed.

'I was ready to meet you at Truro the other day,' he told me over lunch in the King's Hotel. 'There had been a lull in the wind. . . . I had polished my shoes and changed. . . . Then it blew up again. It was impossible to take the dinghy across.'

'I understood,' I said. My anxiety seemed far away, now.

'Yesterday was the same. I was going to 'phone you this morning, as soon as I got ashore. . . . But now you are here. . . . It was clever of you—and very sensible—to come.'

I helped him to choose his ration of meat, and fruit and a cauliflower. Then he wanted a cake. 'Pick out one,' he said, looking at some under a glass counter. I chose a pink cake sprinkled with coconut.

We went down a lane towards the harbour to get rope and sandpaper. It was a shop that sold a medley of things to do with the sea: port and starboard lamps; green glass balls that hang on fishing nets; rowlocks; oil-cans; pennants; compasses; models of ships in bottles. The place was filled with the meowing of a cat and her kittens.

At twenty past three we were in a café nearly oppo-

site the Customs House. 'The tea scalded my throat. But there was no time to waste. The launch was leaving in 'ten minutes. I was to visit him on board the next day, but as yet he had told me no details. As he counted out change to pay the bill, he said, 'A car will fetch you at Truro at two o'clock to bring you to King Harry's Ferry. I'll be there for you with the dinghy.'

We walked down to the quay. He was carrying parcels and a canvas bag laden with shopping. I had the cake in one hand, in the other a bunch of gaily-coloured freesias he had bought for me. I watched him as he stored away his packages under the deck. The dog barked. The boatman started up the engine. I waved, then walked up the slope into the street.

* * *

It was very quiet on the river. Only the muted clank of the rowlocks and the splash of the oars. And, in the distance, the cooing of a wood-pigeon.

*Bring two cows, David,
Bring two-o.*

I sat very still and straight, looking at Simon as he pulled on the oars. His shoulders were strong and broad. I thought of Odysseus. Was he not called, in Homer, the bell-wether of the flock?

We drew up under the *Mirabelle*. I would have to go up the ladder now. Simon had warned me. I had said that I did not mind. In fact, I was absurdly

frightened. Still, he would tell me what to do; and be proud if I made no fuss.

I heard him say, 'Shall I go first? Then all you have to do is follow,' and my own voice in reply, 'Just what you think.'

The ladder was swaying very slightly from the movement of the river. Between the rungs I saw the great, black hull. Below, I caught a glimpse of green water, then I fastened my eyes again on the hull. Its surface was shiny, yet uneven. I moved my hands from rung to rung; then my feet, crabwise and awkwardly. The rungs seemed very far apart. I remembered a railway bridge I used to cross when I was a child. The planks had been loose. Between them I had seen the steel-glinting lines, far below.

Then I heard Simon's voice. 'All right?' he asked. And his hand reached back from the deck.

'Not many women would have done that!' he said.

★ ★ ★

He took me over the ship. Fore and aft. Up and down. Our footsteps rang on iron stairways. I saw the name *Mirabelle* written in black letters on the white lifebuoys. We picked our way among ropes and anchor chains, and the smell peculiar to a ship crept up my nostrils. Our voices came back to us in the silence. Even the boy was away. He had gone home to Swansea, and there was some doubt whether he would be returning. I thought of the ship at night.

'It must be very quiet,' I said.

‘Only the owls,’ he answered, ‘and the crying of curlew in the dawn.’

We looked down upon the river. Its glass-smooth depths mirrored the sky and woods and leafless hedgerows powdered with blossom of snow. At the water’s edge, a heron alighted then folded its wings about it, like an old woman putting on a shawl.

Simon had two cabins on the bridge. In the outer one there was a desk and a leather-covered armchair, and on the walls some photographs of ships. The inner one, which seemed to be all shining white, had a bunk and a basin with chromium taps. Through the open porthole I saw a great yellow-billed gull strutting on the canvas of a lifeboat.

‘You may like to wash your hands,’ he said. He had put out a towel and an unused tablet of French Fern soap. I noticed his shaving brush on a shelf above the basin, and, as I turned the taps, I thought how he used them every day. . . . I remembered a phrase from one of his letters: ‘The silent monasticism of life on board ship.’

We went into the galley for tea. Simon poked up the fire in the range, then put on a kettle. He made me sit down. ‘This is my show,’ he said. He laid two places, took out of a tin the cake I had chosen the day before; uncovered a plate of rather thickly cut bread and butter; boiled two eggs (‘I got these locally from a farm,’ he said), and removed the top from a jar of honey.

While we had tea, the green, shadowy water was

visible on either side through the open doors. It all seemed to me strange and wonderful.

I helped him with the washing-up, and threw some scraps overboard for the gulls.

'I'd manage nicely if you were here,' he said.



When we went down the ladder, the sky was pricked with the first stars. By the time we reached King Harry's Ferry it was a deep, luminous blue.

Simon made fast the dinghy, and we walked up the hill. There were walls on either side, and, reaching above them, trees and shrubs and whispering bamboos. We went under an archway. Moisture dripped from it. It made me think of some eighteenth-century grotto. Then we passed a house standing back from the road, with a square-towered stable clock, and a letter-box in the wall. Soon the walls had given place to banks and hedgerows. A little animal darted almost under our feet, and I heard the cry of a bird.

We stopped, and stood with our elbows resting on a gate into a field. A horse was grazing. We could see its black shape and hear the pulling of the grass and the clink of iron-shod hooves. Then, it came thudding up to us and nuzzled my hand: its breath was warm and its nose felt like wet suède. Below us the lights of Truro blinked through the darkness.

'You're happy, Anna?' Simon said.

'Very happy,' I answered. And as I stood there, I was filled with love and pity because he was going

back to the loneliness of the empty ship. And a phrase I had heard, somewhere, came to my mind. Were they the words of a saint? Or a bishop? '*Servus servorum Dei.*' A servant of the servants of God. If I was not to be Simon's wife, yet I would serve him for very love.

'Simon,' I said, 'if you don't want to marry, I am still your loving servant.'

I had said a wild, wild thing. Yet I knew that it was in some manner true—that I would try to be for him what he wanted me to be.

'Thank you, Anna,' he said. And his hand rested on mine.

He went with me to where the road from the river meets the main road to Truro.

I thought, as I sat in the bus, how he was walking back alone under the stars; and how, when he came to the landing-stage, he would untie the dinghy by the light of a torch and row himself over the black water.

XVII

THE SUMMER was passing, and still he was on the river. The boy, after his leave in Wales, came back for a few weeks, then asked to join a ship going abroad. 'Of course, go,' Simon told him. 'Wouldn't I have done the same?' The company said that they would replace him, but they had not done so. 'No doubt they're economising,' Simon wrote. He was not going to remind them. Anyway, he did not want a chattering boy around. The watchman did odd jobs for him: he was a good fellow.

His days were full. There was work on hand in the engine-room. Men came from Falmouth for this. And there were more men painting the decks. There had been no instructions to paint his quarters on the bridge. But he wanted the ship to be as perfect as he could make her, when the time came to hand over. So he bought paint and did the job himself.

Representatives visited him from the company in London. They were impressed with what he was doing. They praised his efficiency and loyal service, and invited him to dinner in Falmouth. They apologised, too, for not having replaced the boy: they would look into the matter on their return.

Yes, he was busy enough. The night watchman lit

the range in the galley, and cooked his breakfast. Otherwise he got his own meals, as well as meals for Jingo, the cat, who was his only permanent companion. She was a little black animal, thin and wiry, with a tip of white to her tail. She had darted up the gangway before the ship sailed from Abadan.

Perhaps I'm getting peculiar [he wrote]. I have taken to talking to myself, and to addressing monologues to Jingo. I wonder, sometimes, if this strange existence will ever end. I expected to be here for a matter of weeks, and welcomed the rest from voyaging—more especially as I hadn't felt too fit at the end of the war and a doctor I saw in London told me to take it easy. . . . But now it's getting on for six months. . . . I'm not bound, of course, to stay, but having remained so long, I may as well see it through. . . . It gives me a chance to think out the future.

Now and then, he rowed up the river to another tanker. He knew the master, whom he described as a 'big Geordie from Tyneside, with a laugh fit to shake Olympus'. Sometimes the two of them went ashore of an evening and walked the three miles to the Punch Bowl. But Simon wearied of these expeditions. He was not a heavy drinker. He preferred to fish with a line from the ship, or to read. Although he was a seafarer, he had many of the tastes of a scholar. He read French with ease; and amused himself by composing

Latin hexameters. The latter pastime he had learnt from the uncle who was a clergyman.

Occasionally he visited a doctor and his wife who lived on the Roseland side of the river. They had a little girl who was a cripple. Simon made her a shining white Noah's ark with a scarlet roof, and carved and painted the animals for it. One day, when he was left alone with her, the parents came back to find the two of them singing sea shanties—the child's tremulous notes keeping time to his tenor.

He wrote me a letter every Sunday. If the weather was possible, he rowed across to King Harry's, walked up the hill, and dropped it into the box in the wall. My answer reached him the following Friday, when the mail was brought out in the launch that took him to Falmouth. He used to leave the rest of the post on board to attend to when he returned in the evening. He put my letter in his pocket to read over lunch at the King's Hotel.



It was August when I next visited him. The cornfields were burnished gold, and the trees about the river a dark, heavy green.

I had a room in Falmouth, above a hairdresser's shop. Under the window there was a slate roof cushioned with moss and splotched with mustard-coloured lichen, then a white wall with a mass of montbretia and blue hydrangeas at the base. The top of the wall was decorated with large white shells—the

kind that, if held to the ear, are full of the roar of the sea. When darkness blotted all else from view, I still saw the whiteness of the wall, and, out in the harbour, innumerable little white boats looking like ballet shoes strewn upon the floor of the night.

As before, we drank tea in the galley and looked down on the river from the bridge. But Simon was weary of the ship and glad, when he could, to take a few hours away. Sometimes he rowed ashore in the dinghy and we walked in fields and woods and twisting lanes. Once we took the train from Truro to Penzance and ate sandwiches by the harbour, while we watched red-winged yachts on a crêpey, amethyst sea. The *Scyllonia* was in. We talked of how, one day, we would make a voyage to the Isles of Scilly.

'I wouldn't mind living there,' he said, 'in a white house with a fuchsia hedge.' His eyes had the distant look that I knew well—as though they were set on an ever-receding shore.

★ ★ ★

Later that day we clambered on to a headland. In a gully below waves broke over the rocks, and pippets called to one another upon the wind.

'I like to feel independent,' Simon began. 'My uncle wanted to order my life—to keep me on his farm. And my mother, too, liked to arrange things. . . . Suppose I were married, and I wanted to get away on my own?'

'But you could.'

'You wouldn't mind?' The conversation had turned into something between ourselves.

'Of course not.'

'You mean, in fact, you wouldn't care whether I was there or not?' His voice had become tense and nervous.

'Of course I'd care—but I wouldn't expect you to be chained to me.'

I wondered whether I had reassured him.

On the way back, when we were alone in the railway carriage, he began again: 'Anyway, what would you marry for? You've been to Oxford. . . . You've a life of your own.'

I did not answer. My mind had gone back to Aunt Kate. 'There's no sense filling your head with books, if you're going to have a husband,' she used to say. . . . And, then, I thought of the Oxford don, married to one of his former students, who had said, 'Intelligence can be a woman's loveliest adornment, if, with it, she is still a woman.'

'Well, Anna?' Simon broke in.

'A life of my own—I would call it an inner life—isn't a barrier to marriage,' I said.

'You have not answered my question,' he persisted. 'I asked you what you would marry for.' Again, it was the Simon who could not believe himself loved.

I was silent, searching for words. Then I took up his. 'What would I marry for? I don't know how to put it. . . . For something that is above and beyond a

life of one's own, yet does not exclude it . . . something to do with two hearts beating as one.'

★ ★ ★

Two days later I visited him on board the ship. It was a Saturday. I was to spend the night at Truro, and leave the next day to join my friend, Kathleen, at Exeter.

It was a fine morning. A blue sky was braided with pearl-like cloud. Simon met me at King Harry's Ferry with the dinghy. I was surprised when he said that he did not like the look of the weather. 'He's being a pessimist,' I thought. But he knew better than I supposed. When we went on to the deck after lunch, a strong wind was blowing from the north-west and the sky was a sullen grey.

He stood, with his hands on the rail, looking down on to the river.

'I'm sorry,' he said with sudden brusqueness. 'I'll have to get you ashore. Now, at once. Before it's too late.'

'Oh, Simon . . .' I had been thinking of the afternoon stretching leisurely ahead of us. Then I said, 'That's all right.'

'Leave the clearing,' he told me. For we had gone back into the galley and I was putting the plates together. 'Get your coat.'

I did as I was told, and followed him down the ladder.

★ ★ ★

The river was a surly, clouded yellow. It swept by in great sheets that overspread one another, then broke in frothing foam. I marvelled at the neatness and the skill with which he manipulated the dinghy. But he was pulling on the oars with all his strength.

I sat facing him, silent and afraid. Afraid with sheer cowardice for my own skin. Afraid for the little boat that creaked and swerved as the water slapped against it. Afraid for Simon who, when he had put me ashore, would have to take himself back to the ship.

The thought came to me that he would not be able to get to Truro the next day (he was to lunch with me, then see me off). Yet it hardly troubled me. Tomorrow was very far away. If only all were well for today.

'I'll have to land you on the Tolverne side of the river,' he said. 'The current is too strong for King Harry. You'll have to walk a bit, then cross by the ferry. It's the best I can do.'

I cared nothing, except to be ashore and know that he was safely on board.

'See you tomorrow!' he said, as he helped me out of the boat, 'if the weather changes.'

'Thank you. All the best,' I called to him, as he pulled away. He shouted something in return, but it was lost on the wind. . . . In the war one of my letters to him had been lost on the wind. It was at Scapa Flow. A tugman was handing some mail aboard. Simon reached down to take it, when he saw an en-

velope addressed in my writing whipped away over the sea. . . .

As I stood on the beach watching him take himself back to the ship, a more horrible fear possessed me. We were separated, now, if anything should happen. And it would have been on my account. He was close under the bows, near the huge cables that reached down, taut, into the water, like chains from the nostrils of some gigantic beast. Then he was out of sight, for the ladder was on the starboard side, which was hidden from where I stood. I waited. It seemed an unconscionable time. Still I waited. Then I saw him waving to me from the deck. He looked lost in the ship's immensity.

★ ★ ★

On Sunday the weather was no better. Indeed it was worse. Rain was falling now, driven by the wind in great diagonal sheets. I knew that he could not come. And yet—for such is the folly of the heart—I waited in the hall of the Red Lion till two o'clock was past. I thought, as I ate my lunch alone, how he, too, would be eating his solitary meal, glancing, maybe, as he did so, at a newspaper already two days old; and every now and then holding out a scrap to Jingo, the cat, as she stood on her hind legs and dug her claws into his trousers.

XVIII

SIMON was to visit me at Wells for my half-term in November. All was settled, when he had news that shipowners might arrive that week from Amsterdam : it was impossible for him to be away from the vessel for any length of time. Finally we decided that I would visit him.

The train was late. It was after half-past ten when it came into Truro. I was glad to get out of the steamy, over-heated carriage. The frosted air filled me with exhilaration, and I chose to walk to the hotel by a way that was longer than necessary. The streets were silent. I heard the river whispering under the stone bridge. Gabled roofs and the slim cathedral spires were black against the sky. I felt as if I were in a medieval town in France.

★ ★ ★

It was very still, the next morning, when I set out for the river. The golden cocks on the cathedral faced steadily to the south-east, and the ball of the sun glowed red through mist. I went part of the way in the Feock bus. It bumped along winding high-banked lanes. Then I followed on foot a road that I had come

to know with Simon in the summer. It did not lead to King Harry's Ferry, but to a little beach almost opposite to where the ship was moored. I wore a pair of wellingtons, for he had told me that in winter the ground near the beach could be soggy and almost impassable. They brushed one against the other as I walked.

There was a landmark every now and then. . . . The pink-washed cottage with window-panes that had a green thickening in the centre of the glass. . . . The two holly trees, with branches intertwined, that we had named Philemon and Baucis. . . . The gate where a buzzard perched so still and so close that we could see the streaky breast and lemon claws. There were still blackberries in the hedgerows, and the berries of the mountain ash were as red as sealing wax. From time to time china-clay burrows rose, mysteriously pale, against the sky. Or I saw the river winding, like a silver girdle, among the tattered splendour of autumn foliage.

The last part of the way was by a farmyard. The whinnying of a horse and the warm smell of cows and hay and dung awoke in me a nostalgia made up of childhood memories. Then the path dropped between oak trees and chestnuts. A robin sang, its notes falling upon the silence like shining drops of water. Leaves rustled under my feet. Suddenly, through the naked branches, I saw the river spread below me, smooth, like a lake, and the great black-and-white and rust-red ship, half-hidden in mist. As I came

down on to the beach, a hefon rose on vast umbrella wings.

★ ★ ★

Late that afternoon we were sitting in the galley. We had been reading *Dry Salvages* to each other, taking the book turn about. I had first read the poem in the war, when letters came at long intervals and ships were being lost.

*Lady whose shrine stands on the promontory
Pray for all those who are on ships . . .*

I had said the words many times.

Darkness was gathering. The fire glowed between the bars of the range. From time to time a cinder dropped to the fender. I looked across at Simon. He was wearing a blue fisherman's jersey that came close under his chin. It gave his face, in profile, a clear-cut sculptured look. He stood up, rolled back his sleeves and raked the ash from the fire. I noticed the short, chestnut-coloured hairs on his forearm.

'Fancy coming all this way for a week-end!' he said. The thought seemed to occupy him, for he had made the same remark when we met in the morning. 'And all the walking in those "Sea boots",' he went on, looking at the wellingtons.

He picked up a newspaper, then sat down.

'I've been keeping an eye out for property,' he said, scanning the advertisement column. 'Tell me . . . Would you still like to live down here?'

'I would.'

'With me?' he asked. Then he took my hands into his. 'As my wife, Anna?'

'Yes, Simon, as your wife.'

★ ★ ★

We sat in the firelight, now silent, now talking of the future. It would not be long, he said. The ship would probably be sold to the Dutch company. When the transaction was over, he was to take her to Amsterdam. It might be the end of January. Perhaps earlier, possibly later.

'Anyway, we can marry in the spring,' he said.

'May I tell Aunt Kate at Christmas?' I asked him.

'Yes,' he answered.

I said Christmas, for fear I should seem to rush him. I wanted my aunt to know, partly to give her pleasure, but also to prove to her that Simon loved me.

★ ★ ★

We planned to have dinner in Truro, but he had a letter to write first. We went out on to the deck, then up the steps to the bridge. Simon went in front holding his torch to guide me. The sky was powdered with stars. I stood at his desk as he struck a match and lit the oil lamp. He turned the wick up, then down, then up again. 'These lamps are the devil,' he said. The Spanish 'madonna' was on his desk. The lamp-light made shadows on the carved wood.

'I like this statue,' I said.

‘So do I. . . . You can have it to take back with you, if you like.’

‘Oh no! Please let it stay here with you.’

‘Well, it’s yours, to keep, whenever you want it,’ he said.

He sat at his desk writing in the lamplight. I sat in the arm-chair, with my feet under me, watching his bent head and powerful shoulders. From time to time I wanted to get up and run through the great empty ship and shout and shout for joy.

XIX

IT WAS a few days after Christmas. I was reading Simon's letter at the breakfast table in Chantry House. He thanked me for an iced cake that I had sent, and hoped that I and my aunt had a happy time. There were arrangements, too, about our meeting at Plymouth the following Saturday. We had planned this some weeks before, when he found that he would have to be on board at Christmas.

'I shall be waiting on the platform when your train gets in,' he wrote.

As I read the letter, the voices of the old ladies rose and fell. 'My dear, you don't know . . .' Mrs Devine was saying. 'Poor soul, poor soul,' the archdeacon's widow broke in. A gale rattled the windows and roared down the chimney in whirling, deep-toned gusts. Rain spattered the glass. I heard the voices and the rain and the wind. But I was removed from it all, caught into a private happiness.

In her room, Aunt Kate, too, was reading a letter from Simon. I had put it on the tray, for I had taken her breakfast upstairs to her. It was an answer, of course, to the note that she had enclosed with her Christmas card. 'I asked her to write it.

'Simon said I might tell you we're going to get

married,' I had said. 'So say you're pleased. It seems unfriendly not to mention it, when he knows I've told you.'

I was looking forward to reading his reply.

★ ★ ★

When I opened the door, I knew that some terrible thing had happened. My aunt's face had a strange, drawn look. She seemed, suddenly, to have become old. Simon's letter was lying open on the bedspread.

'That's a terrible, cruel man,' I heard her say. 'He's made of stone. I wish you'd never met him.'

I snatched up the letter. My eyes swam, so that I could hardly read it, and it was as though hammers were pounding in my head. It began with greetings for the New Year. Then I read:

I am afraid there has been a mistake. I have no intention of marrying Anna. . . .

'Oh, no, no! It cannot be. It's all settled,' I cried in a flood of weeping.

'He's no good to you, Anna.'

'He is. He is.'

'The man has wasted your life.'

'My life's my own,' I flung back 'No one can waste it.'

'What about your future?'

The future? I had abandoned the future, that night on the road from the river, when I said, 'If you don't marry, still I am your loving servant.'

'You won't go to Plymouth now, after that?'

'I shall go! I shall!'

My eyes fell on a piece of sewing that I had been working at the evening before. I snatched it and thrust it roughly into my work-basket. The pins in the material jabbed my hands, tearing the flesh.

I went out of my aunt's room, into my own. The daily woman was cleaning the basin.

'Terrible morning, miss,' she said.

'Terrible,' I answered.

I took my mackintosh, and went downstairs, and out into the rain. There was nowhere else to go.

I walked along the moat. The water was pocked with rain. Rain dripped from the elms, and stained the trunks with daubs of black. It beat into my face, stinging my cheeks. I pushed through the wishing gate into the fields. A heifer blocked the way. I thrust it aside. The animal's coat was wet and sticky, and its breath was warm on my hand. The warmth comforted me, then stirred my grief anew. It was on this path, in these fields I had walked with Simon on that golden day in September. . . . Oh God . . . there was nothing now . . . nothing . . . nothing.

The rain streaming down my cheeks mingled with my tears.

On the way back, I passed the doctor's house. I saw him through the window, sitting at his desk. I wanted to go in and tell him all. He knew that I was

to have married Simon. He would give me comfort, if there was comfort anywhere. I could not bear the burden of my aunt's distress in the intensity of my own. Besides, I had a grudge against her for having written to Simon—though it was I who had made her do so.

Then I thought, no, I would not tell the doctor; not until I had been to Plymouth.

★ ★ ★

That night I sat upstairs in my aunt's room. She was knitting. I tried to read. The words had no meaning.

'Anna, my dear,' she said to me presently. 'I wouldn't break your heart. Your Uncle George, I remember, was up and down stairs half the night before his wedding, muttering, "I'm damned if I'll marry, I'm damned if I will." It may all come right when you see each other.'

'It may,' I said.

But in my heart I could not think so.

XX

WHEN the train drew in at Plymouth I saw him standing on the platform. His face was deathly pale in the lamplight. He came up to me and said, stiffly, like a little boy who had a confession to make: 'Anna, I wrote a letter to your aunt. . . . Has she had the letter?'

'Yes, Simon, she has.' There was no emotion in my voice.

I had thought in the train of what he had done, He had gone back on his word. He had put me in a false position. He had shattered my happiness; destroyed my faith. At one moment I had felt anger, at another a sullen grudge. 'Try to see him as he is . . . to understand him.' The doctor's words kept coming into my mind. Then the grudge—the injustice of it all—would return. Or I felt none of this: only self-reproach, gnawing at me for my folly in having asked my aunt to write to Simon.

Yet, in the moment of seeing him, there, on the platform I forgot my grievances, I forgot myself. I felt only compassion. I remembered the night in the square in Wells—it might have been in another life, it seemed so long ago—when, as I watched him at a distance, his face lit by a match, I had felt for him an

unaccountable pity. . . . I must be calm, and strong. I must help him. We could talk it out later.

★ ★ ★

After dinner we sat in the hotel lounge. It was a gaunt Victorian room, dimly lit by a chandelier. We were alone. Yet we did not talk. Or, when we did, it was at long intervals, and about trivial things. It was as if we were bowed under the weight of words we could not utter. The marble clock ticked on the mantelshelf. A porter came in, emptied an ash-tray and shovelled coal on to the fire.

★ ★ ★

We went out on to the Hoe. Rain was spitting, and the roads were a shiny black. Clouds coursed across the face of the moon.

‘Why did you write that letter?’ I asked him gently.

‘You shouldn’t have told your aunt,’ he whipped back.

I wanted to justify myself—to cry to the house-tops. But love is stronger than justice and the voice of love bade me hold my peace.

‘I must have misunderstood,’ I said. I do not know, myself, if there was irony in my words; or whether, if there was, he sensed it.

He was silent. And then he said: ‘I won’t ever marry, Anna.’

There was no defiance in his voice now.

I walked at his side, my hand in his. Not, as once, in child-like confidence. But to comfort him. I felt no anger, no grudge, only compassion. He knew that he had gone back on his word. And for that reason my compassion was the greater. For he seemed lonelier now than ever before. . . . I remembered, in the inconsequent way that happens at such a time, how I had cheated, once, when I was a child, at school. For two days I was imprisoned in the dark isolation of a knowledge that I could not share. Then, unable to endure my loneliness, I waited after the class, and, with flushed face and quivering voice, burst out to Mother Xavier: 'I didn't get those algebra marks. I copied over Vera's shoulder.' The world was ended, I had thought, as I stared into the nun's face framed in the white coif. She had brown eyes and wide cheek-bones and an uptilted nose that gave her the expression of a good-tempered dog. As I awaited judgment, a matter-of-fact voice replied. 'Thank you, Anna. And now put the matter once and for all out of your mind.' In that moment the walls of my loneliness had fallen, but Simon's walls encompassed him all about.

* * *

On Sunday afternoon we sat in a shelter that faced on to a cold sea sweeping landward from a horizon heavy with cloud. Spray misted the sides of the shelter, and our cheeks were wet with spray. It had been like that all day. Cloud and mist and now and again a shower. We had wandered by the harbour, yet

found no joy in the ships. Then we stared into a pet shop at a linnet in a cage: a poor, drooping little bird.

'It's unnecessary, this kind of thing,' Simon had said, looking at the bird.

'Yes, unnecessary,' I echoed.

Unnecessary. Each in our cage, not knowing a way of escape.

I looked at the incoming waves. Line upon line of them. White-crested and tumbling. Their roar was in my ears. 'If I could understand . . .' I thought.

'Simon?' I said.

'Yes?'

'I don't understand. Why did you write that letter?'

He did not answer.

'Tell me before I go.'

He looked full at me. There was a puzzled frown between his eyes.

'Go? Go where?' he said.

Back to Wells was what I meant. But he took my words differently, it seemed. Did he think that I meant to leave him? To be done with him? It was the conventional, generally accepted solution. No, the time for that was after the fracas in London; or the night at Tilbury, when I began to pack my case. I had made my choice, freely. I would abide by it. . . . Unless, maybe, he no longer loved me? No longer wanted me? Could I be certain what he did want? 'Go? Go where?' The question echoed in my mind.

But I did not answer it. Instead, I said, 'Tell me the truth. . . . Is it that you do not love me?'

He turned on me. 'I have told you, Anna, that I love you. Can you not believe what I say?' *

Could I believe him? Any longer? And yet I knew, blindly, that what he said was true.

★ ★ ★

I lay awake far into the night, watching the raindrops that looked like silver tears coursing down the blue darkness of the window-pane. . . . I heard the thud of the sea. Rhythmic. Heavy with sadness. Measuring a time beyond my time and Simon's.

XXI

I FELT nothing when we said good-bye at Plymouth station that bleak morning in early January. It was as if the roots of my heart were dead. I watched him put my luggage on to the rack, then lifted my face, mechanically, for him to kiss.

As the train steamed out, I was conscious of washing hanging on lines in back-yards without number. Then—ten minutes might have passed, for all I knew, or it might have been an hour—I saw a vast sheet of water, black as ebony, and on it two swans sailing side by side, with necks drawn back and wings arched. While I watched, one of them rose and flew away over the desolate winter landscape, its outstretched neck swaying to the beat of great, spread wings.

‘Is it you, Simon, flying away?’ I said.

As the question took shape in my mind, life began to return to me; and, with it, an anguish of loneliness, so that I wanted him with all my being, though it were, for a moment only, the touch of his hand. Yet, there came, too, a conviction that the Simon who had said, ‘Have I not told you that I love you?’ would not vanish from my life, like a swan in flight. Nor would

I, by any argument of expediency or convention, be persuaded into abandoning him.

★ ★ ★

One night after my return, I went to see Doctor Laine. I sat a long time in his shabby, marbled hall, waiting for the last patient to go.

'I blame myself for making my aunt write to Simon,' I told him.

'Blame?' he said. 'Blame has no sense . . . it's no good to anyone.'

He spoke sharply. It was the end of the day, and he had seen many patients.

'I mean . . . I wish I hadn't.'

'I know, Anna. I know.' His voice was gentle now. It was not in his nature to be irritable for more than a moment. 'We all make mistakes,' he said, 'and we have to forgive ourselves as well as others.' It seemed, as I listened to him, that the furrows on the ravaged face had deepened, and the mittened hands were thinner than ever. 'I wouldn't be too distressed,' he went on, 'Simon snatched at the letter as an excuse. But he would have found another.'

'And yet he said that he loved me.'

'Yes, he loves you. . . . You remember the evening you brought him to see me. All the time you were out of the room, no matter what the conversation, he brought it round to you. I knew, then, that he loved you. . . . It's his doubts, and fears.'

'I don't understand.'

'He's afraid of love. He's a stranger to it.'

'And yet his mother must have loved him.'

'I'm sure she loved him very much. But she didn't make him feel it.'

'But why did he take everything to heart? I know she said she had nothing to live for, when the sister died. But another boy would hardly have given the words a thought. . . . My father said, sometimes, that nothing made up for losing my mother. Yet I didn't feel unloved.'

'No, Anna, because you had warmth and affection showered upon you. You were sure of your father's love, and your aunt's. Simon had none of that. For a child, love has no meaning except in terms of warmth and tenderness. It's the same on another plane. The love of God becomes intelligible only through the Incarnation. Man remains a child at heart, and it is through the Word made Flesh that the loving kindness of God is revealed.'

He was in no hurry for me to leave. He got up and went across the room to a Sheraton cabinet. Presently he handed me a glass of brandy. 'There you are,' he said. 'Drink it up.'

We sat on talking. I was beginning to understand. Simon loved me, in his own way. In a private world of his dreams. The note that I had made my aunt write had broken in upon this world, shattering the secret shrine of his love and confronting him with a reality he could not face. But, the note apart, the voices of doubt and fear had warned him against

marriage; trained him against trusting to a woman's love. He had closed his ears for a while. But they had shouted only the louder. Marriage would subject him to a woman's will. It would make demands he could not meet. It would impose an impossible perfection.

'Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect.'

Poor Simon, he did not understand that the children of God are made perfect in infirmity.

★ ★ ★

'I can show kindness to him,' I said to the doctor before I left.

'You can indeed, but make no demands on him. . . . If you are kind and loving it may be that even yet the wilderness will put forth a rose.'

XXII

SIMON's letters continued to come. And when, at the beginning of March, he took the *Mirabelle* to Amsterdam, he sent me a picture-postcard every day, each enclosed in an envelope.

Within a week of his return to London he told me that he had taken a post in the company's shipping office. 'What will you think, I wonder, of the sailor turned city man?'

He wrote to me on Sundays and often in the week as well, telling me of his colleagues and his work and the journey to and fro in the underground. Rush-hour travelling exhausted him and the artificial lighting tired his eyes. 'I miss the open air,' he said. The rigid bounds set by life in a ship had given him some security. It was not easy to adapt himself to living on land. I recalled, at this time, a remark he had made to me earlier. It was while he was at Tilbury. I had commented on his independence of character. 'I'm all right on board,' he answered. 'But ashore I couldn't manage on my own.' Still, he set himself to it. Soon he had won respect among his companions, and affection, too. Would he keep well, I asked myself. If not, who would care for him? The thought pursued me. I tried to dismiss it; or at least

to view it with detachment. He had chosen this way. I could do no more. So my reason told me. But the reason and the heart are not one.



I went to London several times during the late spring and summer : partly in connection with the school's return from evacuation ; partly concerning the flat in York Place which I was going to take over from Kathleen.

When my train arrived at Paddington, Simon, unless it was his office hours, was on the platform to meet me. Sometimes, too, he would ask whether, if I had nothing better to do, I would lunch with him in the city. He liked me to wait for him in the Guildhall Library. I, also, liked the cool quiet of its book-lined walls. Other days, we met in Threadneedle Street post office, finding our way to each other through the surge of business men passing unendingly in and out the revolving doors. We had an hour, perhaps, together. When it was time to go, he would give me a shy, hurried kiss on my cheek as we stood on the pavement among the swirl of passers-by.



Early in September, I moved into Kathleen's flat.

It became a habit for Simon and me to spend an evening together once in the week. We would go, perhaps, to a concert or a theatre. Or we had dinner at the restaurant where the orange tree grew in the

white wooden tub. Or, more often, in the Rose of Normandy in Marylebone High Street. We used to prolong the meal, sipping our coffee and talking. Occasionally, we drank a liqueur.

While the evenings were warm, we walked, sometimes, in Regent's Park. Or we sat in a little garden where rose-trees bloom among blackened gravestones. As winter came on, we still stopped, when we passed this garden, to look at the blossoms flowering on leafless sprays and strewing the ground beneath with petals that in the lamplight were like shining fragments of porcelain. Or we stared into shop windows, admiring jewellery and antiques and shimmering evening dresses. Now and again we went into the church of Saint James in Spanish Place and sat in a warm darkness lit by flickering white-stemmed candles. When rain was falling we sat on and on, with now and then a whispered word, reluctant to face the black wet streets and to go our separate ways.

I am too near these happenings to analyse my conflicting feelings at this time. I do not pretend that the hurt was quick to heal, or that I did not know moments of despair or resentment. Yet it would be false to exaggerate these negative things, and to forget the happiness and peace of mind that came of our steadfast companionship. Something unchanging held me to him. Call it what you will. Obstinacy. Loyalty. Compassion. Love. Or, as I think, a dogged resolution, compounded of all these, to stay by him to the end, whatever the end might be.

Doctor Laine had warned me to make no demands on him. It was wise advice, but not always easy to follow with one disposed to think himself now neglected, now in danger of being possessed.

'You're welcome to lunch on Sunday,' I would say casually, perhaps at the end of dinner.

'But you may want to do something else?'

'No. You're very welcome.'

'Thank you, Anna. I'm rather busy, as you know. . . . But I'll 'phone if it's not possible.' It had become a formula between us.

An evening or two later the telephone would ring. The conversation that followed was also in the nature of a formula.

'How are you?'—it would begin. Then there were some questions about the school, and a mention, perhaps, of his own work. Finally, like a postscript to a letter: 'I'll be coming on Sunday, if it's still convenient.'

* * *

'It may be that the wilderness will put forth a rose' . . .

I was happy on those Sundays. I knew that I was giving him something that he had hardly known: something that no one else could give him.

While I was busy in the kitchen I listened for the ringing of the bell. When I opened the door, he kissed me, and put into my hands a copy of *Vogue* or a bunch of flowers. Once he brought a tropical plant with

stiff, dagger-shaped leaves patterned in black and yellow. 'I saw plants like this on an island in the Pacific,' he said. Another day, he gave me a pink apron with a frilled edge.

He used to lay the table, polishing each knife and fork with meticulous care. Or he carried in the dishes. Or he took my green watering-can, with a rose on the spout, and watered the geraniums in the window box. Sometimes, he stood round, picking up and examining this or that possession of mine—perhaps the Christening mug, or the Staffordshire horse emblazoned with golden stars. Or he borrowed my brush and smoothed his hair in front of the mirror, then laughed when I pulled out his handkerchief and sprinkled it with *eau de Cologne*. Often he sat in silence at the fire, adding up my marks for the school, or reading and smoking his pipe.

'This is home,' he said.

A new relationship was born from the ashes of the old. We no longer talked of the future. I tried to live day by day—to leave the past to God's mercy, the future to His providence. If Simon's mother had been possessive, so had I; though more, perhaps, in thought than in deed. When I first knew him—it was after he came to Wells—I had prayed that he might be my husband. 'Please give him to me. Give him to me.' A spoilt child clamoring for a coloured ball. Yet I knew in my heart that something was amiss. I knew—but I did not dare to admit it—that sooner or later I would have to learn that only by dispossession

would I find possession. Even the mother of Christ had heard her Son say : 'Know you not that I must be about my Father's business?'

I held to Simon. Yet I no longer sought in him my whole happiness. Unwillingly, but deliberately, I looked away from him. Did he see this? Was he afraid? I was sociable by nature. New friends came to me. He was reserved : withdrawn into himself. And the long months on the river had trained him to yet greater isolation.

At times, I sensed resentment in his attitude.

One day, when he was in my room, the telephone rang. It was Phillip, a young man I had met at a party. He called me 'darling'. The expression had no meaning in the stage and television world to which he belonged. But it was a world of which Simon knew nothing. I explained. But was he convinced? For I knew, too well, how easily a misunderstanding could take root in the mind of one so ready to believe himself unloved.

Another time, when we were having tea, he jumped up exclaiming, 'I'm boring you. You're not listening . . . I'd better go.'

There was pastry in the oven, and my eyes had wandered to the clock. I reassured him, yet his reproach troubled me. For I marked his loneliness, and pitied it.

XXIII

IT WAS a Saturday in December, and the eve of Simon's birthday. We had walked the greater part of the afternoon. Along Marylebone Road, down Edgware Road, through Hyde Park into Kensington Gardens. The last yellowing leaves shivered on the planes, and a wintry sun fell on their flaked barks in rings of watery gold. We skirted the Round Pond, then followed the Broad Walk out on to the Bayswater Road. After tea in the Coburg Court Hotel, we went into the park again and walked towards Marble Arch. The dusk was full of the black shapes of trees. I remembered another December evening, when we had walked among those trees. I had dreamed, then, of being Simon's wife. . . .

We came out of the park at Marble Arch, crossed Oxford Street, turned up by the Church of the Annunciation, then walked through Portman Square into Baker Street. Suddenly, at the corner of Fitzhardinge Street, I found myself left standing on the pavement. I looked about me, wildly. Simon was already out of sight, lost in the crowds that throng the streets on a Saturday evening.

What had I done, that he should turn on me, mutter a curse, and be gone? Nothing. . . . And yet I

knew what it was. I had sensed the black silence towards the end of tea; and afterwards, something about the way he walked—a quickening of the step, a rigidity in the swing of the arms. I had noticed it before, when something had thwarted him. It was like a boy showing off to a younger sister. 'I set the pace. You can keep up or drop behind, as you please.' It made conversation impossible.

The black silence. The aggressive walk. All because I said that Phillip had brought his poems for me to read. I told Simon, not to provoke his jealousy, but to forestall it, should he hear of it later. He used to tell me about his friends, and to whom he gave presents at Christmas. Sometimes he had asked me to choose the gifts.

Tears blinded my eyes. I had a birthday present for him at the flat, and supper prepared. I remembered the dream in which his hand had been torn from mine—when I had called his name and heard my own in answer. This time, he had walked away. Bewildered, desperate, I turned down now one street, now another. I found myself back in Oxford Street. Lyons' Corner House . . . The Cumberland Hotel . . . Marble Arch . . . worn out, I got on to a bus.

* * *

At York Place there was someone standing on the step, reading a newspaper by the light that came through the half-circle of glass above the door. My heart missed a beat.

'Simon,' I said.

'I don't know what the fuss is about,' he murmured. His face was drawn.

As we walked upstairs, I wanted to laugh.

While I stood in the kitchen dipping the cutlets into egg and bread crumb, I thought of the storm that had passed. It was not the first. And each one, as it came, had hurt afresh. Yet, as I looked back, each had hurt less than the one before, as gradually I came to see that they were not directed against myself—that they were the symptom of a hidden wound; an expression of his own unsatisfied heart; a fear, perhaps, that he would lose once and for all the happiness that still could be his, would he but throw aside his doubts and grasp it. . . . A harsh word? What of it? Was it not the very closeness of our relationship that allowed it? To Mrs Oddie his manners were impeccable.

I remembered that I had a present for him. The giving of it might not be easy. And yet, if there had been no gift, he would have felt neglected. Besides, there were all the things that he had given me. At Christmas. On birthdays. And odd times as well. In the early days I had kept count of them, remembering them in order. The violets . . . the photograph . . . the pound notes with which I bought the slippers . . . the casket with the goldfinch on the lid . . . the engraving of the sailing ship . . . the clove carnations . . .

the silver and blue powder₂case. Then others, so that they became confused in my mind. Bottles of scent . . . a tablet of rose geranium soap . . . a strip of sail₁cloth to make into a shopping bag . . . a bracelet that belonged to his sister . . . iced cakes . . . the blue muslin blouse . . . mimosa . . . tight little bunches of anemones . . . the madonna that was mine to have when I chose. And gifts more commonplace, yet no less the symbol of his love. A tonic when I was ill, wrapped in layers of corrugated paper . . . a flask of brandy . . . a jar of chicken jelly. . . .

He was reading by the fire when I went back into the room. 'A happy birthday!' I said. And I held out the pullover that I had made. He looked at it charily, like a horse eyeing an unfamiliar dainty offered to it on the palm of the hand.

'No thanks,' he said. 'I don't want anything. No, really.'

'Well, you needn't have it,' I answered, smiling at him. 'I can find a use for it. . . . But I'd like you to try it on, please, to see if it's made all right.'

He stood up, took off his coat, and slipped on the pullover.

'I must say it's knitted very well,' he said, looking at himself in the glass.

'I'm glad you like it.'

'But I don't need one, thank you. What about giving it to the post?'

I laughed. 'I made it for you,' I said.

He looked at himself again.

‘Oh well, as you’ve taken so much trouble. . . .
Thank you very much.’

As I was putting the cutlets on the table, he came up behind me, and, laying his hands on my shoulders, he said, ‘It was very, very good of you, Anna. It’s what I wanted.’ And I felt a masculine cheek against my own. In his eyes I had become again :

*Fair as a star, when only one
Is shining in the sky.*

★ ★ ★

He was with me on Christmas Day.

I watched him, sitting in front of me, as he tipped the crimson and white chessmen on to the chequered board. Behind him, the evening sky showed red between the chimney pots.

‘You like the crimson, I know,’ he said, as he put out my queen and king. I noticed, as many times before, the neat, strong fingers.

He had said to me one day, ‘You’ve pretty hands, Anna.’

I had laughed. ‘So have you!’

Then his forehead wrinkled in mock horror. ‘A man can’t have PRETTY hands!’

‘Well, shapely then . . . and deft.’ I was thinking with what ease he tied up a parcel or took a watch to pieces. He had tried not to smile at the compliment.

The game went slowly. He thought between each move. My mind wandered. Every now and then I

heard him say: 'Your turn, Anna.' I made a rapid calculation. Sometimes it was effective, more often not. It was always like that, playing chess, with Simon. If I won—and it rarely happened—I had a suspicion that he had allowed it.

I was thinking over the day. It was the first Christmas that we had spent together. Not in the sense that once I had hoped. Yet together for all that.

Pictures crowded my mind. . . . The gold-brown chicken sizzling and spluttering in the roasting pan. . . .

'Your move, Anna.'

. . . Simon on the pavement below, calling up 'Happy Christmas' and carrying under his arm what could only have been a bottle of wine. . . .

'I wouldn't do that. It leaves your castle exposed.'

. . . The pudding ringed with blue, darting brandy flames. . . .

'Check.'

. . . Simon lifting his glass. 'Happy days!' . . .

'Check again.'

. . . 'We could dine in a restaurant,' he had said. 'The cooking will tire you.' But I chose it this way.

'Checkmate, I'm afraid. Thank you for a good game.'

Dusk turned to darkness. The candles on the mantelshelf shone like stars. We sat on and on. Shoulder to shoulder. His arm through mine. His hand resting on my wrist. The past was forgotten. We asked nothing of the future. The peace of the present was all.

XXIV

ONE DAY towards the end of January, Simon took me with him to see a sailing ship that was moored in Wapping Basin.

It was one of those afternoons full of light that can follow a morning of deluging rain. Roofs and pavements shone. The sky was bright blue, and bastioned with clouds dark as iron and silver-edged. The wind was icy.

We turned down a bomb-scarred street, past a barrow laden with mimosa. Suddenly, ahead of us, beyond the graveyard of Saint Paul's, Shadwell, we saw the ship, her masts tall and her rigging 'all set' against the sky. It was as if she rose from among the tombstones.

'Look! Look!' I cried. And, in that moment, the joy I had known in ships—that had seemed to be dead the day by the harbour in Plymouth—was born in me anew.

★ ★ ★

The following Saturday the snow began to fall. When I woke, a blue light filled the room, and the tips of my fingers were cold. I put on a dressing-gown and went to the window. A layer of white rested on the chim-

ney pots, and the plane trees were a black and white tangle against the sky.

The morning was a busy one. I went from shop to shop, filling the sailcloth bag. First, a loin of mutton; then Brussels sprouts, and red currant jelly; then a piece of Stilton, and eggs to be whipped into meringue for a lemon pie.

I was standing in the doorway, brushing the snow from the shoulders of my coat, when I saw a letter, addressed in Simon's writing, on the hall floor. I picked it up, slipped it into the shopping bag and went upstairs. I wondered why he had written, for he was coming the next day.

It was only as I took the letter out of the envelope that I noticed the unsteadiness of the writing. Then I read:

Dear Anna,

I have been unwell since Tuesday. A pain in my chest. The doctor told me to stay in bed. As you know, the telephone is not in my room, so I put off ringing you, hoping to be better. If you could come to see me, I'd be very pleased.

With love,

Si

Please tap on my window, if Mrs O doesn't the bell.

So he was ill. The thing that I had feared had come to pass. I put the letter back into the envelope, walked across to the mirror and powdered my face

with an exaggerated calm. Then I went downstairs and out into the snow. The door slammed behind me. All the calm had gone. My thoughts fluttered this way and that, like imprisoned, panic-stricken birds. He had been ill for four days. I had not known it. 'Tap on the window.' A strange request from Simon. He wanted me. The thought calmed me. He wanted me, and I was here. It might have happened otherwise.

Mrs Oddie answered the bell.

'The commander is ill,' she said. 'He won't want to be disturbed.' She stood in the hall with the door only a few inches open.

'I know. . . . But he will want to see me.' I was full of determination now, as though a lion's strength had been put into me.

'He's difficult,' she went on. Her voice was plaintive, almost confiding. She opened the door wider. 'The doctor said he was to stay quiet. But he dressed yesterday evening and went out to post a letter. He could quite well have given it to me.' He could, I thought. But that was Simon. He would not trust his post to his landlady—least of all a letter addressed to a woman.

'No, I can't let you go in,' she insisted. 'I can't accept the responsibility.'

'I must go in,' I said. I was in the hall now.

'I shouldn't, if I were you.' Her resistance was breaking down.

'I must,' I said again.

★ ★ ★

It was cold and grey in his room. A net curtain covered the lower half of the window. Through the upper half, I saw drifting snowflakes and a light in a house across the square. He was lying hunched under the bedclothes with his face towards the wall.

'Simon?' I said softly.

He turned at my voice.

'You, Anna?' he said.

The words had a harsh, unnatural sound, as if they were spoken through gauze. He raised himself on his elbow.

'You came in the snow? . . . You were always good to me . . . I went out yesterday, to post you a letter. They say I shouldn't.'

His hands rested in mine.

★ ★ ★

Mrs Oddie's telephone was out of order. I went down the street to find a call-box. A blizzard was blowing, and my feet slipped on patches of ice. There was someone in the first box that I came to. I went on to another. There was someone in it, too. I stood waiting. The man inside wore a belted overcoat patterned with enormous checks. He kept nodding his head and opening his mouth, as though he were saying 'Aha. Aha,' and would go on saying it world without end.

The pennies clanged into the coin-box. One. Then the other.

'Yes? Yes?' The doctor's voice was sharp.

'He can't be left where he is,' I said. 'Could you get him into hospital, please. It's urgent.'

'We'll see. . . . There are very few beds.' The voice was impatient now, as though the mind behind it was thinking, 'Some damned, interfering woman.'

'It's urgent,' I said again.

★ ★ ★

When I came back to the flat, the sailcloth bag was where I had put it down in the morning. It had fallen over on its side. The loin of mutton was sticking out of its wrapping paper, and Brussels sprouts were strewn over the floor.

XXV

IT WAS Sunday. There had been a slight thaw. Moisture streaked the trunks of little thorn-trees, and hung in glittering drops on buds already tipped with green.

I was standing outside ward twelve at Saint Martin's Hospital. It was a long wooden hut, about a hundred yards from the main building. It was painted duck-egg blue. This, combined with a gabled roof decorated with a scroll effect, gave it an incongruous appearance; it might have been a cricket pavilion. Near me was a young man, fingering his cap nervously, and a plump, middle-aged woman carrying a hyacinth and a basket of eggs.

The door opened, and we waited again inside. Two nurses passed wearing navy blue cloaks lined with scarlet. I was conscious of their laughter and their sturdy, black-stockinged legs. Then, through a glass-topped door, I saw beds and screens and chromium-plated trollies. So near is health to sickness, life to death.

* * *

I sat with Simon, neither of us talking. He was too ill to talk, nor had we need of words. Only when I stood up to go, did he speak.

'You'll come again?' he said.

I left the ward, a young doctor wearing horn-rimmed spectacles stopped me.

'He's a sick man,' he said. 'Pneumonia on both lungs. . . . If he'd taken care of himself in the early stages . . . I understand he dressed and went out of doors with a high temperature. He tells me he's a bachelor. . . . He needs looking after. Still, you mustn't be too anxious. Everything is being done for him.'

'Thank you,' I said. And looking back I waved to Simon as I had done many a time at a railway station or a bus stop.

★ ★ ★

I came out into the dusk. It was freezing again. Ice splintered under my feet, and patches of snow glittered in the light of a crescent moon. The air was cold as glass. I thought of the hospital: the muggy heat, the smell of antiseptics, the sickening whiff of ether. I stopped and looked back. Squares of apricot-coloured light marked the windows of the ward where he lay imprisoned in that particular, impenetrable loneliness that only the sick can know.

'Simon, Simon,' I said. And tears rushed to my eyes, blurring my sight and falling salt upon my lips. I knew that the time was coming when I would call upon his name and there would be no answer, any more, to my crying.

I spent that night in a world that was between sleep-

ing and waking. I was conscious of my familiar surroundings: my room, my bed, the patch of sky visible between the chimney pots. And, yet, I seemed to be in the hospital, looking for Simon in dimly-lit corridors and down the white length of the ward. . . . Then I was with him, but it was the night at Frome, when we walked through quiet streets under the stars. Again, the scene changed. I was alone, and yet not alone. Above me was a vast starlit sky and flying across it a great silver-pale swan. The throb of its wings came to me like strange music from far away.

* * *

The telephone rang. It was still dark. I reached out my hand. A voice said, 'we are sorry to have to tell you . . .'

He had died in his sleep an hour after receiving the Viaticum.

'If you would be so kind as to call . . .' the voice went on. 'He gave us your name as his next-of-kin.'

Next of kin. I said the words again, and, then, again. So Simon, who had hidden me in the secret places of his life, acknowledged me now in the hour of his going.

XXVI

Deus, cui proprium est misereri semper et parcere . . .

‘Oh God, whose nature is ever to show mercy and forbearance, we entreat thee for the soul of thy servant. . . . Deliver him not into the hands of the enemy, nor put him out of mind for ever. . . . But bid thy holy angels welcome him and lead him home to paradise.’

I was returning from the burial. The car moved slowly among the traffic of Kilburn and the Harrow Road. Through the black frame of the window, I looked out at the snow. . . . There had been snow in the cemetery. It lay softly on the rough piled earth, and rested on the headstones that reached away as far as eye could see. It hid the graves in hummocky drifts. When the wind blew, its smooth whiteness was ribbed, like sand, and tiny clouds of dust rose into the air. In its hushed silence a factory hooter sounded, then the whistle of a train. I saw my flowers lying on the snow—violets and daphne and golden aconites. . . . It was falling fast now, in big flakes like feathers from the breast of a goose. It settled on the shoulders of passers-by and whitened the domes of innumerable umbrellas. An old man selling matches crouched for

shelter under an archway. Two little girls in crimson bonnets tried to push each other off the pavement:

'It was good of you to get in touch with me, and I'm glad to think you were with him,' a voice was saying at my side. 'I'm grateful.'

It was Mr Wilson, Simon's lawyer. I had hardly been conscious of him till then. He had pink, puffy cheeks, bushy eyebrows and a suggestion of side-whiskers. I had found his address on a visiting card in the wallet that they handed me at the hospital along with Simon's watch and the green pen which I had refused again and again to take back, hoping in some wild way that all we had would one day be ours in common.

'And I'm grateful to you,' I heard myself say, 'for being with me at the funeral.'

'I was looking forward to meeting Simon in London this month,' he went on.

'Yes, he told me at Christmas.'

'You knew about me, then?'

'Oh yes, Simon often spoke of you.'

'Yet I knew nothing of you, till your letter. . . . Strange you should mention Christmas. My wife and I had asked him to spend it with us in Somerset, but he wrote that he would be with a friend in London. So that was you? He was very reticent, Simon—the same when he was a boy . . . a fine man. The soul of honour and kind to everybody'.

I thought: 'Easier to embrace the whole world than one human being.'

His guardian didn't want him to go to sea,' he went on. 'I pride myself that I did what I could to help by arranging, in the face of much opposition, that part of the money in trust from his father should be available for his training. I'm probably telling you what you know already. . . . It may well be that you know Simon better than I do?'

'It may be,' I thought, as I looked at the grey eyes that smiled at me kindly.

The snow was still falling. Faster and thicker. The flakes were bigger than ever. I could no longer see the passers-by. Only, now and then, the great scarlet side of a bus. It seemed as though there had never been a time without the snow.



Two days had passed. I was sitting in Simon's room in Montague Square. Its cold emptiness clung about me, like a sea mist. I had packed his things, all except his missal and the Spanish madonna. As far as the world could tell, I might not have existed in his life. I found none of my letters, and from the Christmas and birthday cards, which were in a box to themselves, my name and words of greeting had been cut away. Who could have known that the *Lyrics from the Chinese* and the Astley pipe and the Utrillo print of flat-faced brightly coloured houses were gifts from me?

I opened the missal. The print I had given him of the crimson Redouté rose marked the page of the saint's day that was also the day of my birth, and

above the Introit of the Mass my initials were written with the year in which I was born. Tears came to my eyes for what I had seen and for the smell of tobacco smoke clinging to the yellowing India paper. . . . And, then, I smiled. With a sailor's realism he had changed in the prayer 'For Those At Sea' the words *cursu tranquillo* to *cursu securo*, contenting himself if he be granted not a calm voyage but a safe one.

His voyage was ended. He had come to harbour.

In the square the starlings were whistling in the plane-trees and shovels scraped on the pavements as the last of the snow was cleared away. I took the Spanish madonna from the mantelshelf and, wrapping it carefully in one of Simon's linen handkerchiefs, I went out into the February sunlight.